THE LAST TICKET

and Other Stories

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Asia/Pacific Copublication Programme

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This is a collection of contemporary literature for young people from Asia and the Pacific countries which is widely read, published under the Asian/Pacific Copublication Programme (ACP) carried out by the Asian Cultural Centre for Unesco (ACCU), with the joint efforts of Unesco member states in the region, and in co-operation with Unesco.

This is the 23rd publication of ACP, and 21 Asian/Pacific countries participated; this volume comprises ten stories from ten countries, and the second volume *The Wall and Other Stories* contains eleven stories from eleven countries. All the stories and illustrations have been contributed by 21 countries in the region and selected by Regional Editorial Committee for ACP with the joint efforts of Unesco member states in Asia and the Pacific. All the ACP books published have already been translated into many languages and read by children all over the world.

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Contents

Love Letters 7
Kate Walker *Australia*

Willow Leaves Falling 15
Long Xinhua *China*

The Hungry Septopus 24
Satyajit Ray *India*

Irah Becomes Flower Gardener 47
Toety Maklis *Indonesia*

The Last Ticket 55
Minoo Karimzadeh *Iran*

The Local Representative 67
Mohamad Ali Majod *Malaysia*

A Minikin-Eared Ewe 77
Tsendyin Damdinsuren *Mongolia*

A Kite in the Sky 91
Syed Fateh Ali Anvery *Pakistan*

Impong Sela 99
Epifanio G. Matute *Phillipines*

Kiem — A Manly Boy 107
Ma Van Khang *Vietnam*

Love Letters

Kate Walker

Australia

My name's Nick, and my girlfriend's name is Fleur. She has a friend called Helen, who's got a boyfriend named Clive. Now this Clive is really weird. Well, he does one weird thing I know of, anyway — he writes three-page letters to his girlfriend, Helen, everyday.

"What's wrong with the nerd?" I asked Fleur. She'd spent a whole lunch hour telling me about him.

"There's nothing wrong with him," she said. "You're so unromantic, Nick."

"Of course I'm not unromantic!" I said, and offered her a lick of my ice cream to prove it.

She groaned and pulled her P.E. bag* over her head. She didn't want to talk to me anymore. When girls go quiet, that's a bad sign!

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"You don't love me," she said.

"Of course I love you," I told her. I offered her my *whole* ice cream, but she wouldn't take it.

"You don't love me *enough*," she said.

---

* Physical education bag (sports bag)

"How much is *enough*? How much ice cream does it take?"

"You don't write *me* letters like Clive does to Helen," she said.

"I don't need to; I see you every day in Computers," I said, "and *Chemistry*."

"Clive sees Helen every day in Biology, and Textiles, and Home Science, and Assembly, *and* Roll Call," she said, "and he writes letters to *her*."

I knew what was happening here: my girlfriend was 'cooling' on me.

"OK," I said, "I'll write you a letter."

"Aw, Nick!" She whipped her P.E. bag off her head.

I was glad I'd weakened and said yes. Fleur is really gorgeous. I couldn't risk losing her for the sake of a few lines scrawled on a piece of paper. I'm the envy of the boy's locker room, having her for a girlfriend.

So I sat down that night and began my first letter... 'Dear Fleur.' Then I stared at the page for the next half hour. What do you write in letters to someone you see every day? I chewed my pencil, chewed my nails. Then, in desperation, I finally asked Mum.

"Write about the things you have in common," Mum said, so I wrote the following: 'Wasn't that computer class on Tuesday a *roar*? The best bit was when Brando tilted the computer to show us the little button underneath, and the monitor fell off.'

I wrote about the Chemistry class too, though it wasn't quite as interesting. Not a single kid muffed their experiment or blew their eyebrows off. Then I got really creative at the end of the letter, and added a postscript written in Basic.

I got the letter back next day with 'five and a half out of twenty' marked on the bottom.

"What was wrong with it?" I asked Fleur.

"You made a lot of spelling mistakes, for one thing."

"I was being *myself!*" I told her.

"I didn't notice," she said. "You didn't say anything *personal* in it!"

Is that what she wanted, a personal letter?

I thought it over for five minutes. There were blokes all around the lunch area, every one of them just waiting to take my place and share his chocolate milk with the fabulous Fleur. If revealing a few personal secrets was what it took to keep her, I could do it.

'Dear Fleur.' I began the second letter that night, 'This is not something I'd tell everyone, but I use a deodorant. Only on sports days or in really hot weather, of course.'

No, that was too personal. I ripped up the page and started again. 'Dear Fleur, Guess what? Mrs. Hessel screw me up in History today for no reason at all. I was embarrassed to death. Goggle-eyes Gilda laughed her stupid head off.'

Actually once I'd got started I found the personal stuff not that hard to write. I told Fleur what mark I'd *really* got in the English half-yearly exams. Then I told her about a movie I'd seen where this pioneer farming guy loses his plough horse, then loses his wife, then his children, then his cows get hoof rot. Even though he sits down and bawls his eyes out about it, in the end he walks off into the sunset, a stronger man.

'I'd like to suffer a great personal loss like that,' I told Fleur in the letter, 'and walk away stronger

and nobler for it.'

Her sole comment on letter number two was, "You didn't say anything in it about *me*." That day she went off to eat lunch with Helen.

It was time to hit the panic button. Fleur was 'drifting'. I stuffed my sandwiches back in my bag and went looking for Clive. I cornered him under the stairwell.

"OK, what do you put in your letters to Helen?" I asked him.

Clive turned out to be a decent kid. He not only told me, he gave me a photocopy of the latest letter he was writing to Helen.

You should have seen it!

'Darling Helen, Your hair is like gold. Your eyes remind me of twilight reflected on Throsby Creek. Your ear lobes are... Your eyelashes are...' And so on. It was what you might call a poetic autopsy.

As if that wasn't bad enough, he then got into the declarations of love: 'You're special to me because... I yearn for you in History because... I can't eat noodles without thinking of you because...'

"Do girls really go for this sort of thing?" I asked him.

"Helen does," he said. "She'd drop me tomorrow if I stopped writing her letters. It's the price you pay if you want to keep your girlfriend."

So I began my third letter, with Clive's photocopy propped up in front of me as a guide.

'Dear Fleur, Your hair is like...' I began. Actually, I'd always thought it was like fairy-floss, pretty from a distance but all gooey when you touched it—too much hair spray, I suppose.

I scrapped that opening and started again.

'Dear Fleur, Your eyes are like... ' Actually they're a bit small and squinty. I think she might need glasses but she's not letting on.

Scrub the eyes.

'Dear Fleur, Your face is excellent overall. You look like one of those soap-opera dolls.' I thought I would've

been able to go on for hours about her face, but having said that, it seemed to sum her up.

I moved onto the declarations: 'I love you because... ' I chewed my pencil again, then my fingernails. This time I couldn't ask Mum.

Why did I love Fleur? Because she was spunky. Because all the guys thought so, too. Well, not all of them. Some of them thought she wasn't all that interesting to talk to, but I put that down to jealousy.

Still, I began to wonder, what *had* we talked about in the three weeks we'd been going together? Not much really. She'd never been interested enough in my hockey playing to ask in-depth questions about it. Likewise, I have to admit, I hadn't found her conversation on white ankle boots all that rivetting either.

No wonder I was having so much trouble writing her letters — we had nothing in common. I barely knew her. What were her views on nuclear disarmament? Maybe she didn't have any. Was she pro-Libyan without my noticing it?

I scrapped the letter, scrapped Clive's photocopy, and started again, this time with no trouble at all.

'Dear Fleur, This writing of letters was a very good idea because it gives me the opportunity to say something important to you. I think you're a nice girl, and I've enjoyed going steady with you for three weeks, but I think we should call it off. Even if it's a great personal loss to both of us, I'm sure we'll walk away stronger and nobler. Yours sincerely Nick.'

I slipped the letter to her in computers and she didn't take it too badly, just ripped it up and fed it through the shredder. But then two days later photocopies of

my personal letter were suddenly circulating in the school.

I didn't mind though, because as a result of that, Goggle-eyes Gilda slipped me a note in History that said briefly, 'I like your style, Nick. You've got depth.' I took another look at Goggle-eyes. I didn't mind her style either.

She has this terrific laugh and she's a whiz on computers.

I wrote back straight away, my own kind of letter this time — honest and to the point: 'Dear Gilda, That three-minute talk you gave on speech day, about Third World Famine Relief, was really excellent. I'll be eating lunch in the quad, if you'd care to join me.'

Illustrated by Jonathan Nix

Willow Leaves Falling

Long Xinhua

China

I

She was feeling cold. The early spring wind was a bit piercing. She stamped hard. Under her feet was a layer of willow leaves, wet and slippery. She turned around again and examined the willow tree behind. Well, he was told to come and meet her under this willow with the thickest trunk and the roughest bark. Why hadn't he turned up yet?

Mist was curling up from the pond. A little farther away, were bushes, grape trellises, teaching buildings—all were hazy and seemed to be floating in the mist.

"I too, am floating in the mist," she said to herself absent-mindedly. The incident had made her dizzy.

It was yesterday, at noon, that she had received the letter. At the sight of the bold and unrestrained handwriting, she knew at once who had written it. They were from the same school, the same class. And here was a letter. 'What's at the bottom of it?' She wondered. Sensing something significant, her heart beat faster. She

ran into the bushes on the campus, and tore open the envelope.

Written on the snow-white writing paper were just two lines: "Are you willing to be with me forever on the voyage? Kindly send me your answer." She didn't quite understand at first. It wasn't until after she read it over and over again that she understood its meaning. She lowered her head and blushed all over. What nonsense! She couldn't help feeling both angry and flattered. She was a bit confused. Oh, this fellow, the first bold boy to say such things to her!

What to do? Yes or no? Can it be such a simple matter? Walking aimlessly through the bushes, she plucked a leaf and rubbed it in her hands.

He was respectable, but not amiable — all the other classmates shared this opinion about him. His sharp features and deep bass voice added to his dignity and strength. He was doing well in different subjects, and was more capable than any other classmate while they were working together in the countryside. Yet he was uncommunicative and eccentric.

They had been in the same class for a year and a half, but seldom talked to each other. Their conversation, had never exceeded five sentences. This term he had his seat shifted to behind hers, and that gave them a chance to talk a little more. The other day she had collected a bundle of grass stalks, weaved them into cats and dogs and put them on her desk. He came in and stopped in front of her desk. "How interesting they are!" He said, and cast her a cryptic glance with warm shining eyes. After he returned to his own seat for a while, he murmured her name, asking for a cat. She

complied, and that was their first formal contact. After that they talked more frequently. He would ask her what she was going to read, and then borrow the book for her without being asked. While she was troubling her head over a math problem all by herself, he would throw her a strip of paper with hints on it. And then, then...

Whether she admitted or not, there arose in her heart an obscure desire to see him. She enjoyed watching him delving into books, performing mathematical calculations on the blackboard, doing chin-ups on a horizontal bar, or taking a stroll with his head lowered. Whatever he was doing, even a glance at his dim figure from behind would make her feel steady and sure. On the evening he went to take part in the physics competition, she felt vacant. As a result, everything she did during the two self-teaching periods turned out to be a failure. She did study harder than before. Whenever she was going to give up, a voice would ring from within, "He always gets good marks. He's a boy of strong will, but I'm too poor. No, I must catch up!"

She had no idea that he would write to her; moreover, so boldly and frankly. She was upset and couldn't decide what to do. Then the bell rang for the afternoon class. She entered the classroom with her head lowered, feeling instinctively that his expecting eyes were searching her face unsteadily.

After class, as he passed her, she happened to be raising her head. Their eyes met. As if dominated by some supernatural power, she told him, against her will, that she would be waiting for him under the old willow tree by the pond at five o'clock the next morning. Then

she would give him an answer.

She looked into the distance with uncertain eyes. The moon was losing its light, the stars were becoming invisible, the day was drawing a pale wash of light in the lower sky to the east. 'It's time he came,' she thought, hoping to hear the familiar footsteps soon, for she was indeed tired. Tortured by the struggle between emotion and reason, she had had a sleepless night.

On the other hand, she'd rather not hear the familiar footsteps, because last night her decision had been to refuse him. She didn't know him very well, so how could she accept his proposal? Her heart urged her to say "Yes," but the voice of reason had it. She could survive the agony of losing him, but what if he should suffer… ?

She slowly broke off a willow branch and fondled the greenish leaves on it.

II

In fact, he had been here for a long time. Hiding himself behind a tree not very far from her and watching her figure from behind, he hesitated. With his hands shoved deep into his pockets, it seemed that he could not pluck up his courage. He even regretted having written that letter on an impulse. What if she was offended, and cut him off forever? In that case, it would have been better to simply be friends with her as before than to have written that foolish letter.

He himself didn't know why he had posted the letter but it was too late to retract it now. He had been a muddle-headed bookworm, reading books and

performing calculations; even a word with his classmates had been considered by him a waste of time until he had met her. Her emergence seemed to have opened a window for him to a more colourful world.

It had been a cold day. There were few students in the classroom. He was intently preparing for the Olympic competition, now and then stamping his feet and blowing on his hands for warmth, when she came in quietly with a beautiful glass full of hot water in her hand. Fussy Fatty stepped forward in a hurry to meet her and take the hot glass from her. Suddenly it broke with a loud "pop". "Dear me!" Fatty cried out in alarm.

"It serves him right!" He got a bit excited when he saw her run up to Fatty, hold his hand in hers, and rain questions upon him.

"Are you hurt? Are you hurt? Any cuts?" She didn't seem to care about her beautiful glass at all. Fatty pursed his lips, saying, "Here it hurts!"

"He's putting on a show," he snorted with contempt. She didn't think so, and examined Fatty's hand. "My, there's a cut, it's bleeding!" She said. "Don't move. I'll squeeze the dirty blood out for you." Then she guided him to the clinic. As the door to the classroom closed noiselessly, something, he didn't know what, surged within him. The weather was cold, indeed, but was not his heart colder than the weather?

As he got to know her better, he found his sense growing keener and keener. The tall trees after rain, the meadow in the sunshine, the smell of earth in the breeze, the widespread clouds and the glorious setting sun—all these things touched him deeply, and he saw beauty beyond words in them. When he went home on

weekends, he noticed that in the corner of his mother's eyes there were more wrinkles, and more silver hairs lay on her graying temples. His heart ached. He had a strong desire to comb his mother's disorderly hair with his hand, to embrace his small, thin mother. When his classmates fell ill, he was prompt in getting nourishing food for them in town, riding on a bike all the way from the suburban district where their school was located to the city centre. He also learned to console sick classmates, keeping them company and chatting with them. His heart was brimming with warm feelings.

He owed these changes to her. To him, she was the sunshine, she was the air. He wanted to be with her throughout his life, protecting her and making her happy, like a true man.

It was on that warm evening, while he was leaning on the windowsill of the classroom and gazing at the remote setting sun, when her figure emerged from horizon. He got excited and, picking up his pen, wrote the letter.

Now he was being punished by his own heart. He was so confused. He had never experienced such confusion. He thought a lot. He thought of her refusal. He thought of her acceptance. Both answer tortured him. Her refusal would bring him a lifetime regret, not that he couldn't survive his own misfortune, but that he would never forgive himself if his rash act was to leave a shadow in her heart. But if she accepted... Would he be able to protect her and be responsible for her?

He saw her stamping hard and hunching her shoulders against the cold. He himself was feeling cold; how hard it must be for such a girl. Clenching his hands

into fists in his pockets, he made up his mind to end her waiting. Step forward to meet her, Think of nothing.

III

She had grown anxious from waiting. He may even have met with an accident. Drawing her eyes back from the pond, she lowered her head. Then, on the blanket of greenish willow leaves there appeared another pair of feet in gym shoes, wet and covered with mud. She knew he had come. When did he come, this bad egg?

"You've come, haven't you?" She addressed him, but didn't turn to him.

"Yes," he murmured.

Silence. She was too embarrassed to know what to do next.

Slowly, he pulled two little paper boats from his pocket. "Let's set the little boats sailing, shall we?" He said in a fluid tone, putting a blade of grass into one boat and a flower into the other.

She looked at him, puzzled, not knowing what he meant.

Squatting down by the pond, he picked up another long grass stalk. Not turning around, he said casually, "Are you willing to let these two boats sail side-by-side on the voyage?"

She was in the dark for an instant, and then, understanding, was grateful. She tried to refuse, but her mouth closed tight before she could open it. She saw him turning around, and read the sincere expectation in his bright eyes. She hesitated, wanting very much to lean over him and stroke his hair.

Quiet, motionless, she gazed at the pond in front of her. Mist still enveloped the pond, but it was thinner. Willow leaves were dancing in the wind in front of her.

"Don't tell me you aren't willing… " he faltered, his voice so soft.

"No," said she, herself not knowing how she had said this word.

"Why?"

Why? Why? She lowered her head, fondling a willow branch she picked up from the ground. A sprig of willow leaves fell to land on her head.

"Do you really mean what you have just said?"

"Yes." With these words, she turned her head aside, heavy-hearted.

Silently, he rose to his feet, gently placed the little boat with a flower in it in her palm, then turned and quietly walked away.

"Crack!" The Willow branch in her hand was broken, and he stopped.

"Listen," she said in an unexpectedly loud voice. "I don't refuse!"

He turned around, his eyes brightening with hope. He came up to her and took the little boat from her palm.

She let him have the boat, but turned her head aside. "I don't refuse, neither do I accept. These two boats are too small, aren't they? They haven't been on any voyage yet. Will they be able to decide their destination? Will they know each other's destination and stick to the same route?"

His hands hung down. The paper boats dropped to the ground.

"Yes, they love each other at the present, but it isn't

enough." She went on slowly, "What will become of them if some day in the future one of them is to find he or she has got the wrong companion?"

Her voice seemed to hang, floating over the pond as he thought deeply.

She broke in abruptly. "Allow me five years. Perhaps by the end of five years I will be able to give you a definite answer."

"No, on second thought," she shook her head, "we'd better let the boats float on the water freely. Forget your question. Maybe they will meet again in five years and sail on along the same route. Maybe" she tried to smile lightly, "they will separate and sail in different directions in less than five years, and never recall each other."

"No, they won't. I'm sure at least one of them won't forget the other," he declared earnestly, as if proclaiming a geometry theorem.

"Wait and see!" She smiled cunningly. But she did smile.

"It's time to set the boats sailing!" He reminded her.

They squatted down, put the boats on the water solemnly, stood up, turned around quickly and paid no more attention to the boats.

A small hand reached out.

A big hand reached out.

The small hand and the big hand held each other tightly together.

Greenish willow leaves were falling and falling.

Translated by Zuo Ziming
Illustrated by Su Lu

The Hungry Septopus

Satyajit Ray

India

When the doorbell rang again I made an involuntary sound of annoyance. This was the fourth time since noon. How could one do any work? And Kartik had conveniently disappeared on the pretext of going to the market.

I had to stop writing. When I got up and opened the door, I did not at all expect to see Kanti Babu.

"What a surprise," I said. "Come in, come in."

"Do you recognise me?"

"Well, I nearly didn't."

I brought him in. Indeed, in these ten years his appearance had changed a lot. Who would now believe that in 1950 this man used to hop around in the forests of Assam with his magnifying glass? He was nearing fifty when I met him there, but without a single grey hair. His zest and energy at that age would have put a young man to shame.

"I notice you have kept up your interest in orchids," he remarked.

I did have an orchid in a pot on my window, a present Kanti Babu had given me long ago, but it would

be wrong to say I had kept up my interest. He had aroused my curiosity about plants, but after he left the country I slowly lost interest in orchids, as I gradually lost interest in most of the other hobbies I had. The only thing that absorbs me now is my writing. Times have changed. It is possible to earn a living by writing, and I can almost support my family on the income from my three books now. I still have my job in the office, but am looking forward to a time when I will be able to give that up and devote myself entirely to writing, with occasional breaks for travel.

As he sat down, Kanti Babu suddently shivered.

"Are you feeling cold?" I asked. "Let me close the window. The winter this year in Calcutta… "

"No, no," he interrupted. "I get these shivers occasionally. Growing old, you know. It's my nerves."

There were so many things I wanted to ask him. Kartik had returned, so I told him to make some tea.

"I won't stay long," Kanti Babu said. "I happened to see one of your novels. Your publishers gave me your address. I must tell you I've come here with a purpose."

"Tell me what I can do for you. But tell me — when did you return? Where have you been? Where are you now? There's a lot I want to know."

"I returned two years ago. I was in America. Now I live in Barasat."

"Barasat?"

"I have bought a house there."

"Is there a garden?"

"Yes."

"And a greenhouse?"

Kanti Babu's earlier house had an excellent greenhouse for his rare plants. What a fantastic collection of unusual plants he had! There were some sixty or sixty-five varieties of orchids alone. One could easily spend a whole day just looking at the flowers.

Kanti Babu paused a little before answering me.

"Yes, there is a greenhouse."

"That means you are still as interested in plants as you were ten years ago?"

"Yes."

He was staring at the northern wall of the room. I looked in the same direction; the skin of a Royal Bengal tiger complete with head was hung up there.

"Do you recognise him?" I asked.

"It is the same one, is it not?"

"Yes, see that hole near the ear?"

"You used to be a crack shot. Are you still as good?"

"I don't know. I have not tested myself for some time. I gave up hunting some seven years ago."

"But why?"

"I had shot enough. I am getting on too, you know. Don't feel like killing animals any more."

"Have you turned vegetarian?"

"No."

"Then what is the point? Shooting only means killing. You shoot a tiger, or a crocodile or a buffalo. You get the skin, or stuff the head, or mount the horns to decorate your wall. Some people admire you, some shudder when they look at your trophies. To you they are the reminders of your adventurous youth. But what happens when you eat your goat or your chicken or *hilsa?* You are not just killing them, but chewing and

digesting them as well. Is that in any way better?"

There was nothing I could say in reply. Kartik brought us tea. Kanti Babu was quiet for a while. He shivered once more before picking up the tea cup. After a sip he said, "It is a fundamental law of nature that one creature should eat another and be eaten by a third. Look at that lizard waiting there patiently."

Just above the calendar of King and Co., a lizard had fixed its unblinking gaze on a moth. We looked at it, at first motionless, then it advanced in slow cautious movements, and finally in one swoop it caught the moth.

"Well done," Kanti Babu commented. "That will do for his dinner. Food, food is the primary concern in life. Tigers eat men, men eat goats, and goats, what do they not eat? If you begin to reflect on this, it seems so savage and primitive, but this is the law of the universe. There is no escape from it. Creation would come to a standstill if this process were to stop."

"It might be better to become a vegetarian," I ventured.

"Who says so? Do you think leaves and vegetables do not have life?"

"Of course they do. Thanks to you and Jagdish Bose I am always aware of that. But it is not the same kind of life, is it? Plants and animals can't be the same."

"You think they are quite different?"

"Aren't they? Look at their differences. Trees cannot walk, cannot express their feelings, and they have no way of letting us know that they can feel. Don't you agree?"

Kanti Babu looked as if he was about to say something but didn't. He finished his tea and sat quietly with lowered eyes for some time, then turned his gaze on me. His anxious, haunted stare made me uneasy with the apprehension of some unknown danger. How much his appearance had changed!

Then he began to speak very slowly. "Parimal, I live twenty-one miles from here. At the age of fifty-eight I have taken the trouble of going all the way to College Street to find your address from your publisher. And now I'm here. I hope you realise that without a special reason I would not have made this effort. Do you? Or have you lost your common sense in writing those silly

novels? Perhaps you are thinking of me as an interesting 'type' you can use in a story."

I blushed. Kanti Babu was not very wrong. Indeed I was toying with the possibility of using him as a character in one of my novels.

"If you cannot relate your writing to life, Parimal, your books will always remain superficial. And you must not forget that however vivid your imagination, it can never be stranger than truth... Anyway, I have not come here to preach. As a matter of fact, I have come to beg you for a favour."

I wondered what kind of help he needed from me.

"Do you still have your gun, or have you gotten rid of it?"

I was a little taken aback at his question. What did he have in mind? I said, "I still have it, though it must be pretty rusty. Why do you ask?"

"Can you come to my house tomorrow with your gun?"

I looked at his face closely. He did not seem to be joking. "And cartridges too, of course," he added. I did not know what to say. Was he perhaps a bit touched in the head, I wondered, although his conversation did not show it? He had always been a bit eccentric, otherwise why should he risk his life in the jungle looking for strange plants?

"I don't mind coming with the gun," I said, "but I am very curious to know the reason. Are there wild animals or burglars around where you live?"

"I will tell you everything when you come. You may not finally need the gun, and even if you do, I promise I won't involve you in any act that is

punishable by law."

Kanti Babu rose to go. Putting his hand on my shoulder he said, "I have come to you, Parimal, because when I saw you last, you like me were attracted to adventure. I have never had much to do with human society, and now my contact is even less. Among my few friends and acquaintances, I can think of no one with your gifts."

The thrill of adventure which I used to feel in my veins seemed to return momentarily. I said, "Tell me how to get there, and when, and where… "

"Yes, I'll tell you. Take the Jessore Road straight up to Barasat Station, and then you'll have to ask. Anyone will be able to tell you about the Madhumurali Lake, about four miles from the station. There is an old indigo planter's bungalow near the lake. Next to that is my house. I hope you have a car?"

"No, but I have a friend who does."

"Who is this friend?"

"Abhijit. He was with me in college."

"What sort of person is he? Do I know him?"

"Probably not. But he is a nice chap. I mean he is all right if you are thinking of trustworthiness."

"Well, bring him along then. Come at any rate. I don't have to tell you that the matter is urgent. Try to reach well before sunset."

* * *

We don't have a telephone in the house. I walked to the corner of the road and rang up Abhijit from the Republic Chemists.

"Come right over," I said. "I have something very important to tell you."

"I know. You want me to listen to your new story. I'm afraid I'll fall asleep again."

"It's not that. Quite a different matter."

"What is it? Why can't you speak up?"

"There's a mastiff pup going. The man's sitting in my house."

It was impossible to get Abhijit to stir out unless one used a dog as bait. In his kennel he had eleven varieties of dogs from five continents, three of them prize winners. Five years ago he was not so crazy about dogs, but now he could think and speak of nothing else.

Other than his love of dogs, Abhijit had one good quality — a total faith in my ability and judgement. When no publisher would agree to take my first novel, Abhijit bore the cost of production. He said, "I don't understand these things, but you have written it and so it cannot be downright trash. The publishers must be fools." The book sold rather well and brought me some fame, thus confirming Abhijit's faith in me.

When it turned out that the mastiff story wasn't true, I got what I deserved, one of Abhi's stinging whacks on the shoulder. But I didn't mind because Abhijit agreed to my proposal.

"Let's go. We have not had an outing for a long time. The last one was the snipe shooting out at the Sonarpur swamps. But who is this man? What is the story? Why don't you give me more details?"

"He did not give me any more details. How can I tell you more? But it is better that there should be some

mystery. It gives us an opportunity to exercise our imagination."

"At least tell me who the man is."

"Kanti Charan Chatterjee. Does the name mean anything to you? At one time he was Professor of Botany at Scottish Church College. Then he left teaching to travel around collecting rare plant specimens. He did a lot of research and published some papers. He had a superb collection of plants — especially orchids."

"How did you meet him?"

"We were once together in the Kaziranga Forest bungalow in Assam. I had gone there hoping to bag a tiger. He was looking for Nepenthes."

"Looking for what?"

"*Nepenthes.* That's the botanical name. The pitcher plant to you and me. Grows in the forests of Assam. Lives on insects. I have not seen it myself, but this is what Kanti Babu told me."

"Insect-eater? A plant? Eats insects?"

"I can see you never read botany."

"No, I didn't."

"Well, you don't have to be so skeptical. You can see pictures of these plants in textbooks."

"Very well, go on."

"There isn't much to say after that. I got my tiger and came back. Kanti Babu stayed on. I was scared that some day he would be bitten by a snake or attacked by a wild animal. We did not meet more than once or twice after returning to Calcutta. But I thought of him often, because for a short time I too got hung up on orchids. He had told me he'd bring some new specimens for me from America."

"America? So he's been to America?"

"One of his research papers was published in a botanical journal abroad. He became quite well-known because of it, and was invited to a conference of botanists. That was way back in '51 or '52. After that I did not meet him until today."

"What has he been doing all those years?"

"I don't yet know, but I hope we will find out tomorrow."

"He's not a crackpot, is he?"

"No, more than you at any rate. You and your dogs are no better than he with his plants."

We drove along Jessore Road towards Barasat Station in Abhijit's Standard. 'We' included, apart from Abhijit and I, a third creature — Abhijit's dog Badshah. This was my mistake. I should have known that, unless specifically forbidden, Abhijit was sure to bring one of his eleven dogs.

Badshah was a brown Rampur hound. Large and strong, he occupied the whole of the back seat. His face stuck outside the window, and he seemed rather appreciative of the wide expanse of green paddy fields. Occasionally, he would snort contemptuously at the village dogs by the road side.

When I had hinted that Badshah's presence may not be necessary on this trip, Abhijit had retorted, "I've brought him because I haven't much faith in your gunmanship. You have not touched a rifle for years. If there is danger, Badshah will be more useful. His sense of smell is extraordinary, and you know how brave he is."

There was no difficulty in finding Kanti Babu's

house. We arrived by about two-thirty in the afternoon. After we entered the gate, a driveway led to his bungalow. At the back of the house there was a large dried up Shirish tree next to a tin shed which looked like a factory. Facing the house, across the road, was the garden, and beyond the garden a longish tin shed in which a number of glittering glass cases stood, arranged in a row.

Kanti Babu welcomed us, but frowned a little at Badshah.

"Is this dog trained?" He asked.

Abhi said, "He obeys me. But if there are untrained dogs around I can't say what he might do. Do you have dogs?"

"No, I don't, but please tie him up here to this window in the sitting room."

Abhijit looked at me sideways and winked, but tied the dog up nevertheless like an obedient boy. Badshah registered a mild protest, but seemed to accept the situation.

We sat on cane chairs in the verandah outside. Kanti Babu told us that his servant, Prayag, had injured his right hand, so he himself had made some tea for us and kept it in a flask. We could ask for it when we wanted it.

I could not imagine what untold danger might be lurking in a peaceful place like this. Everything was quiet except for the chirping of birds. I felt very silly carrying the rifle and put it down against the wall.

Abhi is basically a city man who cannot sit still. The beauty of the countryside, the songs of unknown birds — these things don't move him much. He fidgeted for

a while and then spoke abruptly, "I heard from Parimal how you were nearly killed by a tiger in the forests of Assam while looking for some outlandish plant."

Abhi is fond of making his speech dramatic by exaggerating things. I was afraid he might offend Kanti Babu, but he only smiled and said, "To you, danger in the forest invariably means a tiger, doesn't it? Most people seem to think so, but... No, I did not meet a tiger. Once, I was bitten by a leech, but that was nothing."

"Did you get the plant?"

"Which plant?"

"Pitcher or pewter or whatever plant you call it."

"Oh, you mean Nepenthes. Yes, I did. I still have it. I'll show you. Now I have lost interest in most other plants except the carnivorous. I have disposed of most of the orchids, too."

When Kanti Babu went inside, Abhi and I looked at each other. Flesh-eating plants! I vaguely remembered a page from my botany textbook in college, and a few pictures seen fifteen years ago.

Kanti Babu returned with a bottle which turned out to be full of grass-hoppers, beetles and other insects of assorted size. The stopper of the bottle was pierced with holes like the lid of a pepper pot. "Feeding time," he announced. "Come with me."

We proceeded to the tin shed which had glass cases under it. Each case contained a plant of a different kind, none of which I had seen before.

"These plants are not to be found in our country," Kanti Babu said. "None except the Nepenthes. One is from Nepal, another from Africa. The rest have all been

brought from Central America."

Abhijit wanted to know how these plants stayed alive in our soil.

"They have nothing to do with the soil," Kanti Babu replied.

"What do you mean?"

"They do not get nourishment from the soil. Just as human beings get food from outside, and can comfortably survive in most countries other than their own, these too thrive as long as they get the right food, wherever they might be."

Kanti Babu stopped near one of the glass cases. Inside it was a strange plant with green leaves about two inches long, with serrated white edges like sets of teeth. The glass case had a round door the same size as the mouth of the bottle. With very swift movements Kanti Babu opened this door, uncorked the bottle and pushed the mouth of the bottle through the door. As soon as a moth emerged from the bottle, he quickly withdrew the bottle and shut the door. The moth flitted about for a while and then settled on a leaf. The leaf immediately folded itself in the middle and trapped the moth in a tight grip. The grooves of the teeth fitted into each other so snugly that the moth had no chance of escaping.

I had never seen such a strange and frightening trap designed by nature.

In a choked voice Abhi asked, "Is there any certainty that the insect will always sit on the leaf?"

"Of course. These plants emit a smell which attracts insects. This one is called Venus' fly trap, brought from Central America. It is listed in all textbooks of botany."

Kanti Babu said.

I watched the insect with fascination. It had thrashed about a bit at first, but now it looked listless. The pressure of the leaf on it increased. The plant was not less predatory than a lizard.

Abhi tried to force a smile. "It won't be a bad idea to have a plant like this in the house. Easy way to get rid of vermin. No more sprinkling of DDT powder to kill cockroaches."

"No, this plant won't do," Kanti Babu said. "It won't be able to digest cockroaches. Its leaves are too small."

Inside the next glass case we saw a plant with long leaves like those of lilies. From the tips of each leaf hung a pouch-shaped thing. I recognised in from the pictures I had seen.

"This is the Nepenthes, or the pitcher plant," Kanti Babu explained. "Its appetite is bigger. When I first got it I found the remains of a small bird inside the pouch."

"Good heavens!" Abhi shuddered. "What does it live on now?" His casual attitude was changing to awe.

"Cockroaches, butterflies, caterpillers, things like that. Once, I had caught a mouse in a trap, which I tried to feed to the plant, and the plant did not seem to mind. But over-eating can be fatal for them. The plants are very greedy and do not know their natural limit."

We moved from one glass case to another with mounting fascination. Butterwort, sundew, bladderwort, some of these I recognised from pictures seen earlier, but the rest were totally strange and unbelievable. Kanti Babu had about twenty varieties of carnivorous plants, some of which were not to be found in any collection in the world.

The most exquisite of them was the sundew. It had glistening drops of water surrounding the furry texture of its leaf. Kanti Babu took a tiny piece of meat about the size of a cardamom seed and tied it to a piece of string. When he gently lowered the string to the leaf, even with the naked eye we could see the hair on the leaf rear up greedily towards the meat.

Kanti Babu withdrew the string and explained that if he had lowered it further, the leaf would have grabbed the meat like the fly trap and, after squeezing out all the nourishment from it, would have thrown away the rest. "No different from the way you or I eat, eh?"

From the shed we came out into the garden. The shadow of the Shirish tree had lengthened on the grass. It was about four in the afternoon.

"Most of these plants have been written about," Kanti Babu continued, "but the strangest specimen in my collection will not be listed anywhere unless I write about it. That is the one you must see now. Then you will know why I have asked you to come today. Come Parimal, come Abhijit Babu."

We followed him towards the shed that looked like a factory. The padlocked metal door was flanked by two windows on either side. Kanti Babu pushed one open and peered in. Then he asked us to come and look. Abhi and I bent over the window.

The western wall of the room had two skylights high up near the ceiling, through whose glass panes some light filtered in to partially illuminate the place. What stood inside the room did not look like a plant at all. It resembled an animal with several thick antennae. Slowly we could distinguish the trunk of the tree rising

up to about eight or ten feet. From about a foot below the top of the trunk and around it sprouted the antennae. I counted seven of them. The trunk was pale and smooth with brown spots all over. The antennae appeared limp and lifeless now, but a shiver ran down my spine as I looked at them. When our eyes got used to the half-light we noticed another thing. The floor of the room was littered with feathers.

I don't know how long we stood transfixed. Finally Kanti Babu spoke, "The tree is asleep now, but it is almost time for it to wake up."

Abhi asked in a tone of disbelief, "It is not really a tree, is it?"

"Since it grows from the ground what else can it be called? Though I must say it does not behave very much like a tree. There is no name for it in the dictionary."

"What do you call it?"

"Septopus. In Bengali you must call it *saptapash, pash* meaning a coil or a knot, as in *nagpash*... "

As we walked back towards the house I asked him where he had found this specimen.

"In a dense forest near the Nicaragua Lake in Central America," he said.

"Did you have to search very hard?"

"I knew it grew in that region. You may not have heard of Professor Duncan, the explorer and botanist. Well, he lost his life looking for rare plants in Central America. His body was never found and no one knows exactly how he died. This plant was mentioned in the last pages of his diary."

"I took the first opportunity to go to Nicaragua. From Guatemala onwards, I heard the local people talk about this plant, which they called the Satan Tree. Later I found quite a few of them, and actually saw them eating monkeys and armadillos. After a great deal of searching I found a plant small enough to take away with me. Look how much it has grown in two years."

"What does it eat now?"

"Whatever I give it. I have sometimes caught mice in a trap for it. I told Prayag if he ever finds a dog or a cat run over by a car, he should bring it for the plant. It has digested them too. I have given it whatever meat you and I eat; chicken, goat. But recently its appetite has grown so much that I can not any longer satisfy its demands. When it wakes up at about this time of day,

it is very agitated and restless. Yesterday there nearly was a disaster. Prayag had gone inside the room to feed it chicken. It has to be fed the way an elephant is. First a lid opens at the top of the trunk. It takes the food up with one of the antennae and puts it inside the hole on top. Each time it puts some food inside, the Septopus is quiet for a while. If after a while the Septopus begins to wave the antennae again, it means it is still hungry."

"Up until now, two chickens or a small goat a day used to be enough for the Septopus. Since yesterday something seems to have changed. Prayag came away as usual after the second chicken. When he could still hear the sound of thrashing antennae, he went in again to find out what the matter was."

"I was in my room, writing my journal. When I heard a sudden scream I rushed there. A gruesome sight greeted me—one of the Septopus' antennae held Prayag's right hand in a vice-like grip while Prayag pulled with all his strength to set it free. Another antenna was greedily approaching to take hold of him from the other side."

"Without losing any time I hit the antenna very hard with my stick. Then with both hands I pulled Prayag away and just managed to save him. What worries me most is that the Septopus tore off a bit of Prayag's flesh, and with my own eyes I saw it put it inside its mouth."

We had reached the verandah. Kanti Babu sat down and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his forehead.

"I had never realised until now that the Septopus is attracted to human flesh. It may be greed or it may be some kind of viciousness, but after what I saw yesterday, I have no alternative but to kill it. Yesterday

I tried poisoning its food, but is too clever for that. It touched the food with an antenna and threw it away. The only way left is to shoot it. Now you know, Parimal, why I have asked you to come."

I considered this for a while. "Are you sure a bullet can kill it?" I asked.

"I don't know whether it will die. But I am fairly certain that it has a brain. There is enough evidence that it can think. I have been near it so many times, but it has never attacked me. It knows me just as a dog knows its master. There may be a reason for its being aggressive with Prayag. You see, Prayag sometimes teases the Septopus. He would tempt it with food and then withhold it — or take food very near its antennae and then pull it away. It does have a brain, and it is located where it should be, that is, in the head — the top part of the trunk around which the antennae have grown. That is the place where you will have to aim your shot."

Abhijit quickly butted in, "That is easy. You can find out in a minute. Parimal, take your rifle."

Kanti Babu raised his hand to stop him. "Does one shoot while the victim is asleep? Parimal, what does your hunting code say?"

"Killing a sleeping animal is against all codes. Specially when the victim cannot move. It is quite out of the question."

Kanti Babu brought the flask and served us tea. About fifteen minutes after we had finished drinking it, the Septopus woke up.

For some time Badshah had been getting restless in the front room. But now a sudden swish and a shining

sound made Abhi and I rush there to see what the matter was. Badshah was frantically trying to break free from the chain. Abhi tried to restrain him by raising his voice. Just then a strange sharp smell filled the air. The smell as well as a loud thrashing sound seemed to be coming from the direction of the tin shed.

It is difficult to describe the smell. I had to undergo surgery once in my childhood to get my tonsils removed. The smell brought back memories of the chloroform they had given me during the operation. Kanti Babu rushed into the room. "Come, it is time."

"What is that smell?" I asked.

"The Septopus. This is the smell they emit to attract food… "

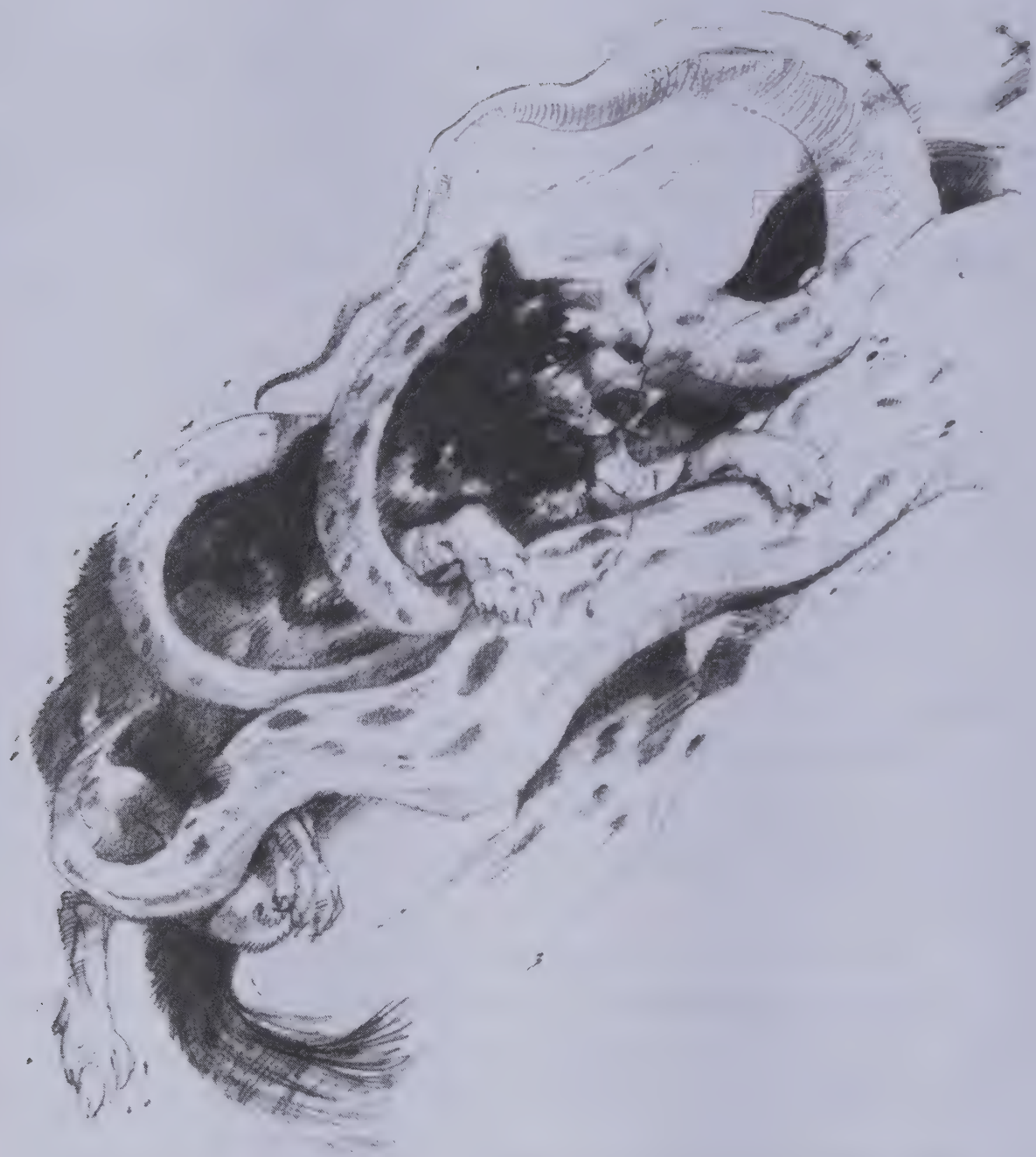
Before he could finish, Badshah in one desperate pull managed to jerk open his collar, and knocking Kanti Babu to the floor, rushed towards the source of the smell.

"Disaster!" Abhi shouted as he ran after the dog.

When I reached the tin shed with my loaded rifle a few seconds later, I saw Badshah disappear through the window, in spite of Abhi's attempts to stop him. As Kanti Babu opened the padlock door we heard the death howl of the Rampur hound. We rushed in to find that one antenna was not enough to hold Badshah. The Septopus was enclosing the dog in a fatal embrace, first with one, then with a second and a third antenna.

Kanti Babu yelled at us, "Don't go a step forward! Parimal, shoot."

As I was about to take aim, Abhijit stopped me. I realised how much his dog meant to him. Heedless of Kanti Babu's warning, he advanced towards the



Septopus and wrenched free one of the three antennae that held Badshah.

My blood turned to water as I watched this frightening spectacle unfold. All three antennae closed in on Abhi now, letting go of the dog, while the other four slowly swayed forward like greedy tongues tempted at the prospect of human blood.

Kanti Babu urged, "Shoot, Parimal, shoot! There, at the head."

I fixed my eyes on the Septopus and watched a lid slowly open on the top of the trunk revealing a hole. The antennae were carrying Abhi towards that hole. His face was white and his eyes bulged.

In a moment of extreme crisis — I have noticed this before — my nerves become calm and controlled, as if by magic.

With steady hands I held my rifle, and with unerring aim shot at the point between two round spots on the head of the Septopus.

I remember, too, the flood that spurted out like a fountain. I think I saw the antennae suddenly going limp, releasing their grip on Abhi. Then the smell grew and enveloped my consciousness.

* * *

It has been four months since that incident. I have at last been able to resume work on my incomplete novel.

Badshah could not be saved. Abhi has acquired a mastiff pup and Tibetan dog, and is looking for another Rampur hound. Two of Abhi's ribs had been fractured. After being in plaster for two months, he is back on his feet.

Kanti Babu came yesterday. He said he was thinking of getting rid of all his carnivorous plants. "I think I'll do some research on common domestic vegetables like gourd, beans and brinjal. You have done so much for me. If you want, I'll give you some of my plants. The Nepenthes, for example. At least your house will be free of insects."

"No, thank you," I said. "Throw them all out if you want to. I don't need a plant to rid my house of insect."

"Ditto, ditto," chirped the lizard from behind the calendar of King & Co.

Translated by Meenakshi Mukherjee
Illustrated by Subir Roy

Irah Becomes Flower Gardener

Toety Maklis

Indonesia

The meeting room was noisy. Gamelan music intermingled with loud and soft voices. Several men wearing ties were talking to the village headman of Cibiru. These were city men who wanted to invest their money in flowers marketable in Jakarta.

This was the first meeting between the investors and the farmers. The farmers assembled from several villages had, of course, to be given some guidance first, as they had no experience in growing flowers.

The meeting place was now full of people. First, the farmers had to listen to the speech made by the headman of Cibiru, and after that to some explanations offerred by the city men. Finally, those who were interested in becoming flower growers were requested to hand in their names and addresses to Mrs. Sri.

There were obviously not many farmers who wanted to become flower gardeners. From the neighbouring village Cihejo, the one most expected to become a flower plantation because of its suitable soil and climate, there was only one representative, a cheerful girl of fourteen called Irah.

Irah was the only daughter in her family. She was the eldest, then came three little boys. She had loved flowers since she was very small. As the daughter of a farmer, she knew a lot about growing plants.

Mrs. Sri put Irah's name on the list, and gave her a book with pictures of all kinds of attractive flowers. Mrs. Sri told Irah to read and study the book so that she would know the names of the flowers, what flowers were suitable for growing in Cihejo, how to plant them, and what fertilizers to use. Irah nodded and promised to read the book.

The next meeting would be held in three months. By then, all participants were expected to know the contents of the book so that they could put their knowledge into practice.

Irah did not look cheerful on her way home. How could she understand what was written in the book if she didn't even know how to read it? There was no one to ask at home. Neighbours? No, better not ask the neighbours, she thought.

Oh, how stupid she was for having thrown away her chance to study! How she regretted it now. There was indeed a compulsory elementary education in her village. A few weeks after she started school, however, she got typhoid fever, and had to stay at home for months. When she returned to school, she was already far behind the other children. She grew lazy, and used typhus as an excuse for staying home, making people believe that high fever had made her unable to learn. She was allowed to stay for two years in the same class, but spent most of the time drawing pictures. She became quite skilled at making pictures and designs. Finally

the village headman agreed to release her from compulsory elementary education. Oh she truly regretted it now! That night she couldn't sleep.

The next morning, Irah was sleepy and irritable. The whole family was worried. "Was it because she had had to go all by herself?" Her father asked himself. "But she knew that I had to attend an important meeting to discuss the annual kite competition." Irah's father and brothers were very excited about the kite competition which was to take place in three months in their village. There were to be several prizes, one of them for the best design.

The Cihejo villagers all tried to make their kite the best possible. They had won several prizes in the past and, as before, they expected Irah to do the illustration.

"We have to start discussing the design of our kite as soon as we can," they said, "it takes much time to come to an agreement. We only have three months."

"I also have three months to read the book," thought Irah, feeling her dreams shattered. She sat hours under a jambu tree, staring at the blue sky and the top of the mountains. Her thoughts were far away, in a rose plantation. If she succeeded in this business, she would be able to see and smell roses every day. She would not have to look for flowers every time she had to visit poor Aunt Cicih, who was stuck to her wheelchair and loved flowers very much. She would not have to worry about the marketing. Those city men would take care of it. Just thinking about being among roses and other flowers every day made her feel happy. She smiled, then suddenly became sad again. "Oh, how can I grow roses if I do not know how to take care of them? If only

I could read that book," she sighed.

She was startled to hear her name called. It was time to go in for lunch.

During lunch, Irah's brothers talked incessantly. Irah remained silent.

In the afternoon Irah's friends came. They wanted to talk to her again about the kite. When they pressed her for a reply, she became angry. "I don't want to help you," she shouted, "go away!" She ran crying to her room. Her friends stared in surprise.

Irah's mother did not understand. "Something had happened at the meeting," she thought. "Did they refuse her because she was a girl? No, she is the only representative of Cihejo; they have to accept her." She followed her daughter into her room and saw her flying herself down on the bed crying. She sighed and looked around the room. She saw something on the table. She went to look at it — a book about flowers. She turned the pages, and suddenly she knew...

Back in the sitting room, she faced Irah's friends. "Irah is in trouble," she told them, "she needs your help to make her dreams come true. Will you help her? Will you teach her to read?"

They were all ready to help, and finally it was decided that Irah's best friend Sari would secretly teach her to read and write. The others had to act as if they knew nothing about it.

"Well, you all have to be patient," said Irah's mother. "Until she has overcome her obstacle, Irah obviously will not be able to help you with the kite."

The next morning Sari came to have a chat with Irah.

"This is unbearable. Because I can't read, I won't be

able to possess that flower plantation I've always dreamed of," Irah cried.

"Don't be sad, Irah. You will possess your rose garden, for I'm going to help you. I'm going to teach you every day until you are able to read and write."

"You mean it?" Cried Irah, "Oh, but we only have three months' time, and I am expected to help them make that kite."

"Let's forget the kite for the time being. Knowing your talent, you don't need much time to make the design and illustration. Why not concentrate on your lessons first? If you do your best, you will be able to read within one month."

"I'll do my utmost," Irah promised.

Irah made good progress. She was now more cheerful. She did not mind that all her friends knew about her learning to read, and she did not mind being taught by them. They taught her in turns, to read, to write and to take dictation. In the end, the book about flowers was read and discussed in the 'classroom' by all.

Irah was grateful to her friends, and one day she told them that it was time to help them with the kite. They all clapped their hands when they heard the good news.

They spent many days discussing the shape and design of the kite. Finally one of the boys made the kite and Irah made the illustration. When she had finished, everybody was filled with admiration. It was a big kite with a long tail, a unique shape with a beautiful design of flowers on it. The village headman came to see it for himself and praised her. Irah had done

her utmost for the good name of her village, Cihejo.

As expected, Cihejo won First Prize, for the kite's beautiful design of flowers was irresistable. The whole village was invited by the headman to celebrate.

"Now that the competition is over, I'm going to concentrate on my roses," Irah told her father the next day. "I'm going to be a rose gardener."

"I fully agree with you, and I promise to help you," said her father. "The most important thing is that you feel happy with your work. Do you realize how much you can do with flowers?"

"Aunt Cicih will certainly feel happy every time I send her flowers," Irah said.

"Not only Aunt Cicih, Irah. You can make many people happy with your flowers. In turn, making others happy will bring happiness into your own heart."

A few months passed.

It was a sunny day. Irah's garden had never looked so pretty. Flowers in all the colours of the rainbow made her house look bright. The smell of roses filled the air. The garden was full of roses, marigolds, marguerites and carnations, and in the house, vases full of roses filled every corner of the rooms.

All kinds of flowers in Irah's flower plantation found a market in Jakarta. Irah increased her knowledge by reading many books.

Her dream came true. She could see and smell roses every day, and sent flowers to her aunt and also to her friends on their birthdays and on other occasions as well. She had become an accomplished flower gardener.

Translated by Toety Maklis
Illustrated by Salim M.

The Last Ticket

Minoo Karimzadeh

Iran

The line at the bus stop was getting longer, but there was no sign of the bus. Sohrab stepped up to stand behind the last person at the end of the line. The old man standing in front of him asked, "It's seven o'clock, isn't it?"

Sohrab glanced at the sky and said, "I guess so."

Farther up the line was a youngster holding some textbooks in his hand. Sohrab gazed at the books, trying to read the title of one of them from where he was standing, and with difficulty he read, "Natural Sciences." Then the sounds of school bell, hammer strokes and stone cutting machine mingled in his mind. He shook his head as if to get rid of those sounds.

The bus passed them and stopped at the head of the line. The crowd moved. Sohrab reached into his breast pocket, felt two tickets, took one out and shuffled forward with the line. Inside the bus he sat on the last seat next to the window, and the old man sat beside him. Soon the bus filled with passengers. Sohrab crossed his arms, put them over his chest, lowered

himself on the seat and pressed his knees to the back of the seat in front of him. He leaned his head against the window and was about to close his black and sleepy eyes when the old man asked, "Where do you get off?"

"At the last stop."

"So that's why you're trying to make yourself so comfortable."

Sohrab laughed. The heat inside the bus made him drowsy. He closed his eyes, and soon was far from hearing anything.

Sohrab got off, and went all the way down the alley. Reaching the last house, he took a small set of keys out of his pocket, opened the door, and slowly climbed up the stairs. When he got to the second floor he saw his mother cleaning the glass globe of the oil lamp. He moved forward and, untying his shoe-laces said, "Hello."

"Hello, Sonny. Hope you're not tired."

"How's Soodabeh?"

"Thank God, she's better. Mehri Khanoom gave me some quince seeds to give her, and now she wheezes less and breathes more easily."

Sohrab opened the door of the room, and the heat struck his face. Soodabeh was sleeping in her bed in the corner of the room. Sohrab went near the stove, picked up the kettle and held his hands over the stove. His mother came into the room. She put the pot on the stove and said, "Khosro should be here any minute." Then she turned to Sohrab and asked, "What's the date today?"

"It's the 28th."

This month we really had difficulty in making ends

meet. I don't have even one rial* left in my purse. When will you get paid?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"Isn't it possible for you to get two months' pay in advance? Khosro says he has heard news from the village that Aziz is ill in bed and she has no money. The old woman has nobody except us."

"Mom, what are you talking about? The boss doesn't even pay one day's wage in advance, and you think he may give me a month's pay in advance?"

Then, as if recalling something, he turned to his mother and said, "By the way, why don't we get Aziz to come and stay with us?"

His mother got up and walked over to sit on the bed beside Soodabeh. As she gently shook her daughter to wake her, she said, "My dear son, we are not properly settled in this polluted city ourselves. What's the good of asking Aziz to come here? Anyhow, Khosro has already told her several times to do so, but she has replied, 'You should come back and stay with me. I'm all right. You are the ones who are separated from your roots.'"

The wail of a fire engine siren could be heard from the street. Sohrab's mother listened to it briefly, then got up, and as if talking to herself, said, "Mind you, she's not wrong. We have always been wondering, and now even more than ever. We are like beheaded birds in this big city where we have to flutter our wings until we die."

From the stairs they could hear Khosro talking to

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* The basic monetary unit of Iran.

the landlady. Sohrab's mother got to her feet, went to the door and, turning to Sohrab, said in a low voice, "What do you know? Maybe after all we will go back since Khosro is also very discouraged."

In the morning, Sohrab opened the door of the house and stepped outside. The alley was covered in snow and the day was breaking. He glanced at the sky, put his hands into his pockets and started off. The fresh snow crunched under his feet. As he reached the square he looked at the bus stop. Empty buses were picking passengers up and leaving. Sohrab reached into his breast pocket and remembered he had only one ticket left. He looked at the bus stop again, wondering what he was going to do at night. Then he started off walking. "It's better to go on foot now; at night I'll be dead tired and it'll be more difficult."

The snow-covered ground forced him to slow down. After a few feet he turned back and had a glance at the bus stop, "If I continue walking at this slow pace, I won't get there even by noon."

He headed back to the bus stop, and again reached into his breast pocket. In a short while, he was in the line moving forward slowly. He thought of his return trip at night and was about to get out of the line when, unbidden, a question came to mind, "Is it possible to get on the bus without a ticket?"

The man in front of him suddenly turned around, looked at him, and without saying a word again turned his head. Sohrab grew pale at once, thinking, "He must have realized." He lowered his head and felt his knees tremble. The sounds of hammer strokes and a stone-cutting machine echoed in his ears. The line beside the

bus looked like a fallen tree with its branches near the door. The people were pushing their way onto the bus, and before Sohrab knew it, he was standing in the aisle. Then he froze as he heard the driver cry out, "Hey you, where's your ticket?"

Sohrab's legs felt weak and his knees trembled. He was putting his hand into his pocket when he heard someone say, "You're talking to me?"

"Who else do you think I'm talking to? Hurry up."

Sohrab looked at the person talking to the driver. He was a middle-aged man in a black coat, high plastic boots and a new hat, and was firmly holding the hand of a four- or five-year-old child.

The man patted the child's hair and said, "What are you talking about?"

"Ticket. Your ticket."

"How many times should I give my ticket?"

"Give it to me just once and keep the rest for yourself."

"I gave you my ticket."

The driver shouted, "So you did!"

"Yes."

"Do you mean to tell me that there's something wrong with my eyes at this early hour?"

"That I don't know, but I did give my ticket; otherwise, how did I get on the bus?"

"Now, here we go again! Come off it Mister! I don't want the ticket for myself."

The man didn't answer. He turned his face to look outside and muttered something to himself.

The driver started the bus and cautiously pulled away on the slippery snow out of the bus stop. Then

farther down he pulled over. He pulled up the hand-brake and turned the motor off.

One of the passengers said sarcastically, "This is all we need."

The driver, scanning the inside of the bus through his rear-view mirror, calmly said, "We aren't going to move unless you give me your ticket."

The man said, "What trouble I've gotten into because of this guy!"

A well-groomed young man in a brown leather jacket turned to the man and said, "All this fuss over one ticket. Surrender the ticket and let's get through with all this."

The man replied sharply, "What do you mean by 'let's get through with it?' I said I've given my ticket, and I'm not giving another one."

The man standing next to Sohrab looked at him and said, "You see how people disgrace themselves just for one *toman*."

The man's face turned red and he shouted, "You speak as if I'm a thief!"

Sohrab suddenly got scared and looked down. "Surely he knows I'm the one who hasn't given his ticket."

The driver bent down, passed below the bar and went into the aisle. He grabbed the man's collar and said, "You're really trying my patience. Either you give your ticket or you get off right away."

A passenger said, "Have mercy on the poor child trembling with fear."

The boy was holding fast to the man's coat and with terrified eyes was staring at the driver.

The man, his forehead now covered with perspiration, brought up his hands, pushed the driver away, grabbed the boy's hand and said, "I'm not as helpless as you think. I'll go and complain to the person in charge of this line."

The driver pointed to the door and said, "Good idea! Let's go."

Following the man out, the driver said, "What a life! You can't even state what is right."

Passengers watched through the windows as the driver, the man and the boy walked down the street and went into the office. From their angry gestures it was obvious that they were having a fight. Some passengers grumbled and got off the bus.

Staring at the office, one passenger said, "Some people don't even care to know whom they are cheating."

A man wearing a black shirt and sitting on the seat next to which Sohrab was standing said, "Maybe he succeeds in cheating here and now. What is he going to do in the next world?"

Sohrab felt the man was staring at him while speaking these words. He thought everyone was now staring at him. He didn't dare to look up. His legs had become like two dry sticks and he couldn't feel them.

A woman said, "You all speak as if he has killed someone. He just hasn't given his ticket. That's all. Maybe he couldn't afford one. Was it necessary to make all this fuss?"

Sohrab took heart at this and raised his head a little to see the woman, but heard someone else say, "There's no way you can justify theft. These guys are thieves."

Blood rushed to Sohrab's face. He was thinking that if he were to raise his head everyone would look at him, and probably someone would even cry out, "Thief!"

The uproar in the bus was slowly subsiding. Passengers became silent. Sohrab thought they were silent because they were on the watch to prevent him from escaping. He was scared of everyone. "I wish I had gone on foot. I shouldn't have worried about being late or being scolded."

Suddenly, a voice interrupted his thoughts, "There he comes."

Everyone turned towards the windows. The driver was walking towards the bus. The man and the boy were still in the office. The driver got on the bus and angrily muttered to himself, "Damned people. They think I want the ticket for myself."

He sat behind the wheel, released the handbrake, looked at the side mirror and slowly drove off.

Sohrab suddenly moved. Hesitantly and with fear he started walking and in a high voice, though he intended it to be low, he said, "Stop."

The driver hesitated and looked into the mirror, "You want me to stop?"

"Yes sir, I've made a mistake."

"What mistake? There's only one bus line here."

Sohrab insisted, "But I've made a mistake and I want to get off."

The driver braked suddenly, opened the door and said, "My goodness! What's going on today? One wants to get on by force and another wants to get off by force."

Sohrab hurriedly went towards the door, afraid to

hear someone shout, "Don't let him escape!" But, except for an old man's voice who was grumbling because he had stepped on his foot, he heard nothing. After he got off he was hesitant to look at the bus, but finally turned and looked. Some passengers had wiped the steam from the windows and Sohrab could see their drowsy eyes. Not a single one was looking at him.

Sohrab breathed deeply. He clapped his hands with joy and watched his crowded prison moving away. Thank God! He roared with laughter and started off. He still had half the way to walk.

* * *

The night sky was clear, the stars so bright that it seemed one could reach out and pluck them. The trampled snow on the sidewalk had become slushy, and was now beginning to freeze. The gust of icy air which struck his face was so cold that he felt as though his skin would split open.

The streets were deserted, and Sohrab guessed it was about eight o'clock. He was hunched down walking towards the bus stop. When he opened his coat to take out the ticket, the cold penetrated his body and he trembled all over. He took out the ticket and thrust both hands into his coat pockets. The frozen water on the sidewalk crunched beneath his steps. There was nobody at the bus stop. The empty bus was parked a few feet away, and Sohrab gazed at it for a while.

"So much the better that the boss didn't let me leave earlier. He wanted me to make up for the morning. The bus is empty now and the streets are deserted; I'll get

home in no time." Then he yawned. His breath turned to mist, formed a white cloud and floated up in front of his eyes. He sat on the curb beside the gutter and put his head between his knees to warm his ears. After a short while he felt someone sit down beside him. He looked up. It was a boy almost his size, maybe a little smaller. He was wearing a rain coat and green cotton trousers with oil spots on them.

The boy glanced at Sohrab and said, "Hope you're not tired."

Sohrab replied, "You, too." Then he asked, "Are you a mechanic?"

"Yes."

"You've been working till now?"

"If you leave it up to my boss, he'll make you work until midnight."

A bus that was passing the street on the other side attracted the boy's attention. As if remembering something he reached into his pocket and then got up, searched his trousers pockets and said to Sohrab, "Do you have an extra ticket?"

Sohrab hesitantly said, "An extra ticket!"

Then he stared at the boy's tired eyes. He took his hand out of his pocket and held out the ticket. The boy took it and put his hands in his trousers' pockets again. He bent his knees a little as if it would help him reach the bottom of his pocket, and then did the same with the other pocket.

Sohrab touched the boy's arm, and while the boy's hand was still in his pocket, said "I don't want money for it."

"But... "

"There's no 'but'."

"But it's not possible... "

"I said I don't want money."

The boy finally accepted. He looked at Sohrab with eyes full of gratitude and said, "Thank you."

Sohrab grabbed the boy's arm and pulled him aside. The bus stood in front of them. Sohrab stepped aside and told the boy, "Get on."

The boy asked in surprise, "Aren't you getting on?"

"No. I have to take another bus."

The boy got on the bus, and in the same surprised tone said, "Good-bye."

The bus with its streamed up windows passed in front of Sohrab. He stood and looked at the bus taking the boy away for a while. Then he stepped onto the sidewalk, put his hands in his pockets, stamped his feet a few times, and started off.

Translated by Shirin Nayer-Noori
Illustrated by Fariba Aflatoon

The Local Representative

Mohamad Ali Majod

Malaysia

As usual during recess, the three friends Karim, Osman and Yusuf took shelter from the sun under the flame-of-the-forest tree at the corner of the school fence. They were discussing the upcoming oratory competition.

"Nothing difficult about speaking in public," said Karim, a Form Four student, arrogantly. "I'm sure I'll win."

"Don't brag, Karim," said Osman, "you never know. Latif, Zaimaharum and Kahar are good themselves."

"Why aren't you participating?"

"I'm not a coward, but I do admit I don't have the guts."

"Very well put! What's the difference between being a coward and not having the guts?"

"I don't have the guts to compete with Latif. He's great. He has the gift of gab."

"Ha, forget it! He can surely blabber a lot here, but I've yet to see him on stage. Then he'll know who Karim is!"

"I'll wait and see, Karim," Osman said.

"Okay, we'll wait for the Teachers' Day celebration."

The oratory competition was one of the programmes scheduled for the Teachers' Day celebration. Karim had given his name as one of the participants. So far, ten students had registered.

A number of students had gathered there. "How about a sample of your oratory skill, Karim? We would like to hear what you have to say," Yusuf challenged his friend. "All of us here will be the judges. We'll give you the marks."

"You want to be a judge? You can't even speak like a man in class… " sneered Karim.

"What's so difficult about giving marks? I'm used to judging those who speak on TV," Osman answered.

A few other students joined in, and urged Karim to accept the challenge. They were all resting in the shade of the flame-of-the-forest tree.

Karim gave in eventually. "All right, I'll try." He walked to the front, and his friends moved back to give him space. It so happened, there was a small mound there waiting for him.

"Look at your local representative speaking," said Karim as he walked towards the mound. He looked left and right, nodding his head importantly.

"Ladies and gentlemen," began Karim seriously. "What are your problems in this peaceful village? Please feel free to tell me your problems. Why? Because I'm your representative. The honourable Karim, the representative you can come and see anytime."

"Do you need false teeth for your granny? Come and see me. You want to change the broken seat of your toilet? Please come and see me. You need a tortoise to

climb your coconut trees? Please see me. Anything you want. But... please don't forget one thing. Don't forget to invite your honourable representative when you're slaughtering a buffalo for a big feast. Ha... ha... ha!"

The listeners clapped their hands. "Wow! That's great! We didn't realize you could speak that well, Karim," praised Osman.

Karim replied smugly, "What did I tell you? This is Karim, see!"

"Then you're sure to win, Karim!" Said Yusuf.

"How many marks do I get, man?" Asked Karim again.

"The style is there, contents not much," Osman replied. "About six out of ten."

"Not bad," said Yusuf. Karim shrugged his shoulders when he heard Osman and Yusuf. "Stupid judges," he said brazenly.

Karim would speak anywhere. At the canteen before buying his food, he would stand on the bench and begin his speech. "What are the problems here?" He would ask. "If you have any problems, please come and see me. I promise to take it to the headmaster."

"I know very well you're afraid of the headmaster. How do you expect to see him with our problems?" Fauzi challenged him.

"Of course I'd be afraid to see the headmaster if I'm the guilty party, but this is different. I'm conveying the complaints."

Karim would also start his 'lecture' whenever he saw something that disturbed him.

"Just look at your toilets, ladies and gentlemen— dirty and never clean... " he commented as he stepped

out of the toilet.

"Since when do you enter the 'Ladies'?" Queried Zaitun, who happened to be passing by.

"Gosh! You're right. Slip of the tongue! I guess I'm obsessed with speaking in public."

"Be careful, Karim. Don't simply lecture here and there, or people will think you're crazy."

"It's all right. It's good to be crazy about speaking in public. Don't get crazy of *dadah*. That is bad."

"You have answers for everything, don't you, Karim," said Zaitun again. Actually she was interested in this mischievous, restless, and sometimes crazy lad. Karim would do whatever came to his mind, but he would not break any school rules and regulations. He was mischievous alright, but not the annoyance of his friends.

Later, he accidently bumped into Miss Rohana, one of his teachers. Karim was even more mischievous than usual in order to attract her attention.

"Just you look, ladies and gentlemen," he said with such gentleness, "at our lovely Miss Rohana here. She's waiting for me to become your local representative. When I'm in office, your honourable Karim will seek her hand in marriage… "

The other students who heard the teasing all laughed. "Hush!" Said Zaitun anxiously, "Mind you, lest she gets angry."

Miss Rohana only smiled. "I'll wait for you to be our local representative, Karim."

The students grew more excited.

"But by then, Miss, you'll be old," responded Karim as he laughed.

"Aha! A promise is a promise. A good representative never breaks his promise!"

"Terrific! Alright! The honourable Karim will keep his promise!" Said Karim, and he bowed to Miss Rohana as a sign of respect, and in appreciation of her sporting attitude.

Since that incident, Karim was referred to as the 'local representative'. However, he never conveyed any complaints or problems of the students to the headmaster. He simply spoke whenever he pleased within the school compound.

The long-awaited day came. The Teachers' Day celebration was underway at Karim's school, and now

the oratory competition was taking place. Miss Rohana, the chairman for the celebration, was announcing the names of the participants and requesting them to get ready in position beside the stage.

Karim was standing to the left side of the stage. He was ready.

"I'm sure to win," he said to himself. "What's so difficult about speaking in public?" His heart whispered with great confidence.

At that time the applause was tremendous. The sixth contestant had finished his speech. Miss Rohana called upon the seventh speaker, Karim Zain, the 'local representative', to go on stage.

Karim climbed the stairs. Now he was standing in front of the microphone, and he looked up to begin his oration. Suddenly he realized he was standing on stage. In front of him were about a thousand students, all eyes fixed on him. Teachers, too, were looking at him.

All of a sudden, a feeling of intense fear gripped him. His face felt drained of blood. His heart beat furiously. His legs began to tremble, and his hands and feet felt cold. He opened his mouth to begin his speech but he felt choked. Even swallowing was difficult. His mind went blank, leaving him with nothing to say.

Below, his friends were clapping their hands, urging him to begin. Karim became even more nervous, he could hear his heart pounding. Beads of cold sweat started to appear on his forehead.

"Lll... ladies..., gentlemen, chch... chairman," he began, his voice trembling. Then, abruptly it died.

He struggled to get on with his speech but his voice

refused to revive. He felt completely blank, his face pale as he stood still, powerless.

Miss Rohana realized that Karim was paralyzed by a sudden wave of fear. This was his weakness, and it accounted for his heroic acts to hide such a handicap. Surely this was why he practiced speaking wherever he could, as a way to overcome this weakness.

"Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen," Miss Rohana stood up and interrupted without using the microphone. "The microphone is not working..." she continued as she walked towards Karim.

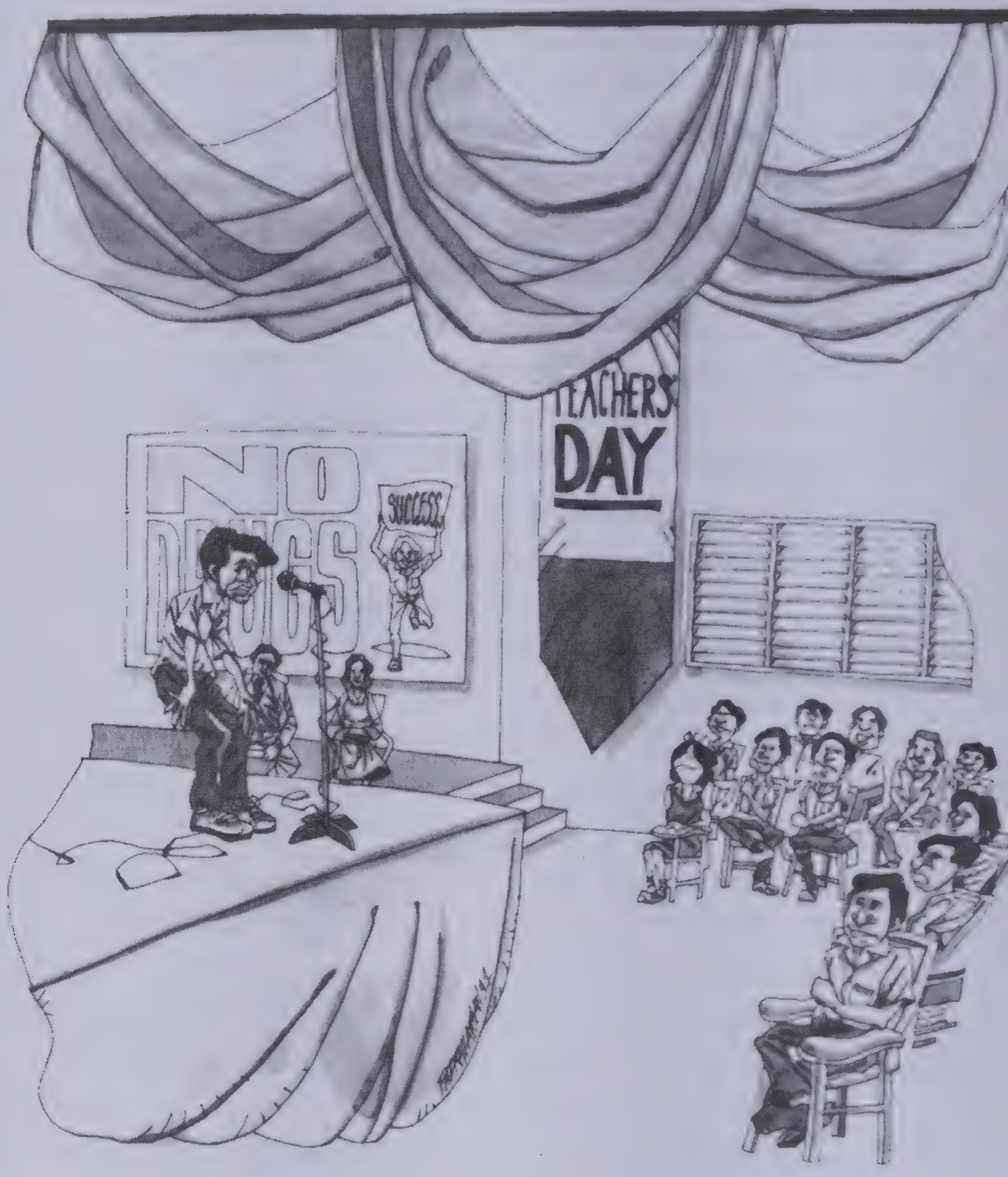
Miss Rohana pretended to check the microphone while at the same time she whispered to Karim, "Don't be afraid, Karim. They are your friends and teachers that you used to meet everyday. They are human, like you. Why should you be afraid? Just imagine that you are giving a speech from the mound under the flame-of-the-forest tree."

Miss Rohana took the microphone from its stand and said, "Actually Karim has already started his speech but unfortunately, the microphone was not on. That's why his voice was not heard. Let's begin again. Now we invite Mr. Karim Zain to deliver a speech on the topic 'The Role of Prefects in School'."

The applause was loud. "Hurry-up, Karim!" Shouted some of his friends quite loudly.

At that time Karim understood the true situation. The students in the hall were his friends! The teachers too were the people he met everyday. Why should he be afraid? With this realization, he felt a bit relieved. His pounding heart started to slow down.

"Madam Chairman... ?" These words eventually



came from Karim's mouth, trembling but with confidence, "... teachers, judges and friends..." and when this first sentence was said, Karim could feel his head on his face, hands and feet. He began to feel confident.

"Actually the prefects should not be elected by the administration but by the students themselves. Prefects are like 'local representatives' of a school. That is why they must be chosen by the students..." Karim continued his speech, spurred on by the confidence he was beginning to feel. He was no longer choking.

"This is important in the process of creating awareness among the students about democracy in this country. This is the time they are taught to cast their votes, to use the rights they have. Today's students are tomorrow's citizens. This fact must be inculcated in them from now. Thus, the prefects should be elected through a general election..."

Karim could hear the loud applause. He felt as if he was really speaking from the mound or at the canteen or outside the toilet. For him those in the hall were no longer there — he was the only one there.

"Prefects are no longer policemen who only look out for the offences committed by the students," he said with conviction as his voice grew louder, "prefects are the students' friends whom they can approach for help, advice and opinions in solving their problems. The problems of the students are not only related to violation of school rules and regulations. Of more significance are those related to welfare, discipline, education, books, equipment, library, social activities and so forth."

The applause was once again tremendous. "Well done!" Shouted a few students.

Karim continued his speech, his tone rising and falling. Once in a while he posed rhetorical questions and answered them himself. The response was overwhelming.

When the competition came to an end, the judges counted the marks to determine the winner. At last Miss Rohana announced the result. Karim won third prize, after Zaimahanum and Fauzi, who won first and second prize, respectively.

Miss Rohana, reading the comments of the judges, said that even though Karim stammered at the beginning, he excelled because his idea was original. The points he raised were original. He did not refer to books, although he might have taken some ideas from other people.

"We don't know whose ideas he has adopted, so for the moment let's assume they're his."

After the ceremony, Miss Rohana asked Karim about the ideas he raised in his speech.

"I've been acting as the local representative of the students all this while, haven't I? Well, that's where the ideas have come from," he answered seriously but with a smile.

Miss Rohana and a few students who heard his explanation nodded their heads. They seemed satisfied with his answer, and there was admiration in their looks. It was then Karim saw Zaitun who put her thumb up for him. "Well done!" She said smilingly.

Translated by Amilah Ab. Rahman
Illustrated by Fazrul Arhan Razali

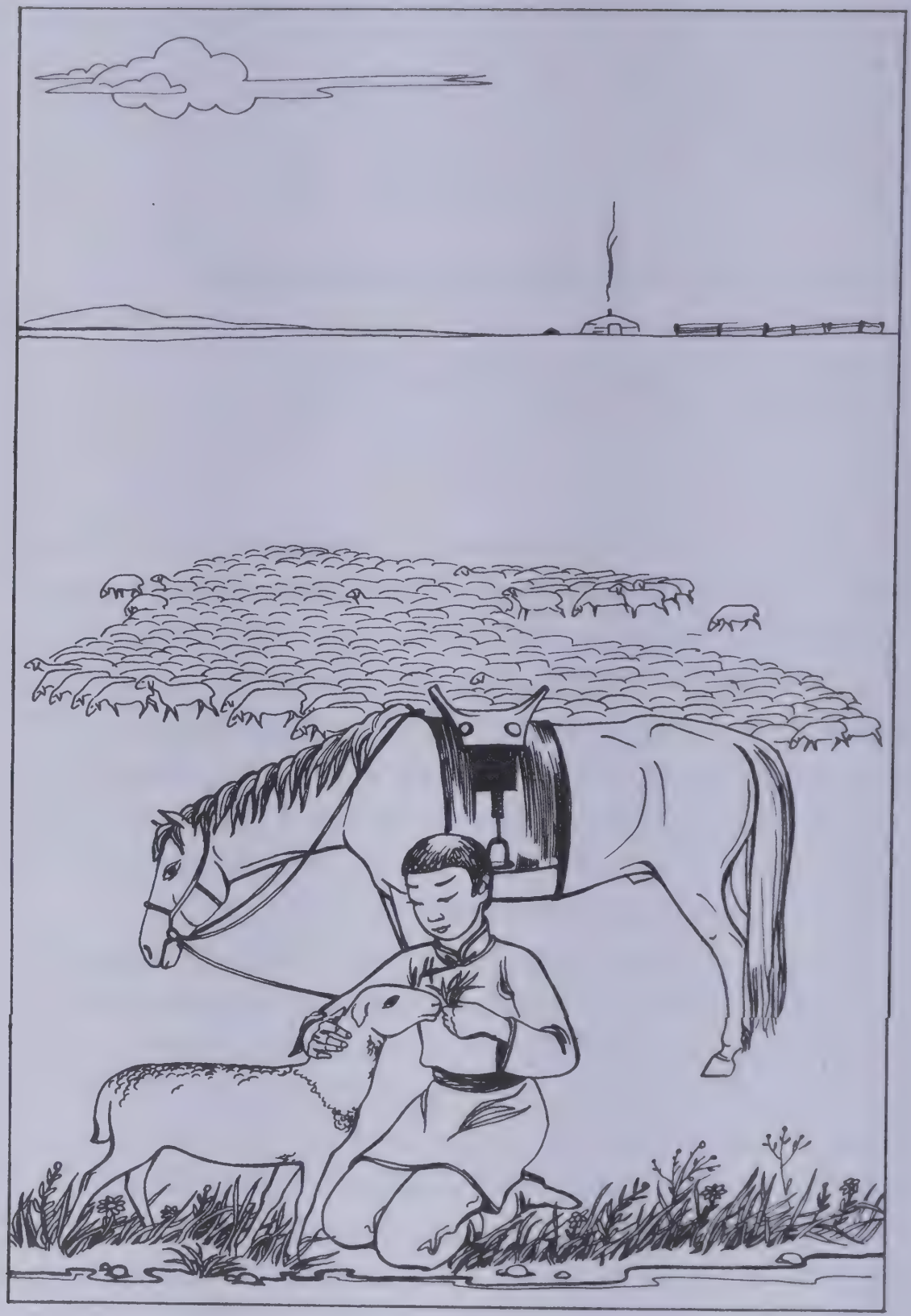
A Minikin-Eared Ewe

Tsendyin Damdinsuren

Mongolia

By the age of thirteen, I had learned to drive sheep pretty well. Ready to move at any time of day or night, I pastured almost five hundred sheep belonging to our family and our neighbour for a whole six months. To be honest, by the end of that time I had become quite fed up with this work. As I drove my sheep through a lonely field, from sunrise to sunset, I could not find anyone to talk to. The only thing I longed for was the call to go home and have hot tea and curd.

I came to know my pasturing sheep quite well. I even got to know which sheep ate lizards, which sheep led the herd and ate the most nourishing grasses, and which lazy ones were the last to move. It is said that the sheep is a friendly, gregarious creature, but I soon realized that no such amiable nature existed. One sheep would eat aromatic grass just as another was about to feed on it. There is no such camaraderie among sheep as you find among horses. Being a clever animal, a horse not only becomes a man's close friend but also makes friends with its fellows. Among the horses are found friends, acquaintances and even enemies. No such



relationships exist between sheep. Nonetheless, occasionally a reasonable one is to be found among them.

I once had an ewe with minikin (tiny) ears, a gift from my uncle on Tsagaan Star*. She was a clever sheep, and we were always on friendly terms. Whenever I called my minikin-eared ewe she would come to me from wherever she was in the flock. Eventually she began coming to me without my calling, and ended up following me everywhere. I always shared with her the food which my mother put in my pocket in the morning when I left home. She was very fond of sweets. It is true that cows do not like the taste of sweets, but sheep do. Whenever I gave a round piece of candy to my minikin-eared ewe, she would follow me the whole day, bleating for more.

One autumn, our two families had to move to a new place. Riding my slow gray pony, I began to herd the flock of sheep, intending to reach the new grazing ground before dusk. It was autumn, the season for fattening the sheep, so it was impossible to drive them fast.

My minikin-eared ewe came running up to me. I gave her a piece of sugar. As we drove forward our ger** in the new place came into sight. Since I had a faint idea of where we would be settling in, I reached it in a short time. The new country was a rich grassland with thick, tall and nutritious grass waving in the breeze. Although it appeared a little dried by the sun, it was

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* The New Year on the lunar calendar.

** a Mongolian dome-shaped house.

much better than the grass in the old place. This new country had many small mounds and hillocks, every one of them covered with thick grass which looked like a fluffy fox cap. The grassy field ended only a few kilometers to the south of our ger, and then the landscape changed into gobi* and toirom** with red budargana*** and yellow sagebrush. Animals love these bitter, salty plants. The contrast between the yellow field and the chestnut toirom made a strikingly beautiful scene.

When I brought my flock of sheep close to our ger, they were soon eagerly nibbling the rich juicy grass, never pausing to lift a head. On reaching my ger, I hitched my horse to a nearby cart and then scanned the horizon. Beneath the sinking sun, a thick dark cloud had gathered, and I said to myself, "Heavy rain tomorrow," then entered my ger.

As I sat drinking a cup of tea, someone outside suddenly yelled, "Fire! Fire!" The voice belonged to the horseherd Avir.

When the three of us — my father, my mother and myself — ran out of the ger, the sun appeared like a blackened red disc. The wind was blowing from the west and we could smell the black smoke!

"There is a fire, and it is approaching. I saw flames from the top of a high mound. The fire is coming nearer!" Gasped Avir, greatly troubled.

My father and Avir tied some pieces of smoke-

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* Gobi Desert occupying 500,000 square miles in east-central Asia mostly in Mongolia.

** a dry circular salt marsh without vegetation and covered with crevices.

*** Svaeda prostrata — a kind of plant.

yellowed felts to the ends of long poles and rode towards the fire after wetting them. My mother harnessed a cow to a cart with a water barrel on it, and hurried after Father and Avir. They were to fight the fire with those wet yellow felts, dipping them into the water barrel when they dried. As Mother left, she called out, "Keep watch over the sheep!" Why should she say that? It appeared that there was no need to pay much attention to the sheep, for they were grazing peacefully around the gers. Anyhow, if the fire approached the gers, how could I alone look after all these sheep?

I stood motionless, simply wondering what my mother and father were doing at the time. If the wind is gentle and the grass sparse, fire can be easily extinguished by the wet felt. I was thinking of a similar incident that had happened once before.

The previous spring I had been playing on the open steppe with two other children. We built a little fire which soon spread to the dry spring grass, and suddenly there was a fire. Luckily the wind was not strong, and we managed to beat out the fire with our fur hats. That evening we caught it from our parents, for we had nearly started a steppe fire, and our fur hats had become like frizzled shanks. This fire, however, was different, for now the wind was strong and the grass was thick and dry.

Suddenly I realized I had no time to ponder over such things. I had to think of something quickly, and I looked around anxiously. Avir's mother, although an old lady, had lost no time. She had already cut the old dry grass growing near her ger, and was now clearing the grass around our ger.

We had several folding wooden pens for our sheep, but they were still lying on the carts. The old lady told me that it wouldn't be a bad idea to unload and erect them. True enough, if I could herd the sheep into the pens, maybe the fire would not harm them, so I quickly got to work. However hard I tried, though, I could not unload the fences to erect the pen, and the roaring fire had already reached us. The fire had crossed the western hillock, burning the grass to cinders. In the midst of the black smoke and leaping flames, I saw several horses running away at full speed. It was impossible to tell whose horses they were. Farther away, a herd of antelopes was also seen running, and among them I thought I saw a pack of wolves. United by their mutual fear of fire, the wolves and antelopes were fleeing from it in one pack. Our sheep also began to panic as the flame and smoke drew closer. I mounted my poor gray horse to round up my scattered sheep.

The old people used to say that gazelles and antelopes fleeing to save themselves from fire in open country panic and lose strength. Even though the antelopes are fast runners, they get exhausted and, overtaken by the flames, are virtually burnt to death. A flame and running, they then catch up with the other tired antelopes and set them on fire, as well.

The elders taught that one must never run away from a fire, but rather should go against it and get through the fire line. When you are standing on its ashe, the danger of the fire will have passed.

I resolved to collect my sheep and drive them against the fire to get them behind the fire line. The fire had burnt everything on the west, and was advancing

eastward. The whole steppe was covered with leaping red flames and black smoke. Although the situation was now very serious and frightening, I called forth my courage, determined to defend my sheep. Mother had told me to look after all these sheep. I had to get them safely away from the fire by any possible means. The wind was quite strong. I hoped the flames would pass quickly, and thought that if I could keep my sheep gathered in one place, I might well save them.

The blazing wall of flames approached our ger. I thought of asking Avir's mother what to do, but I saw her standing with her beloved dog on the cart with iron wheels. Therefore, the life of all these sheep depended entirely upon me.

During this frightening moment, the idea came to me to find my minikin-eared ewe and give her to the old woman. However, there was no time for that. The fire reached the cleared ground near our ger, and passed by the ger and the carts. Red flames raged high everywhere.

This sight encouraged me. As the fire was passing so quickly, I thought I could take my sheep to safety without having their wool catch afire. The only thing I had to do was to gather them and keep them together tightly in one place. That, I discovered, was impossible.

The sheep fled as soon as the fire came closer. I raced my horse before the sheep to collect them. Terrified of the fire, my lazy gray had become a swift gray. Her usual lazines was clearly willful, for she now galloped wherever my reins demanded. Thanks to her I managed to prevent the sheep from scattering further.

However, my efforts were of little good to the sheep,

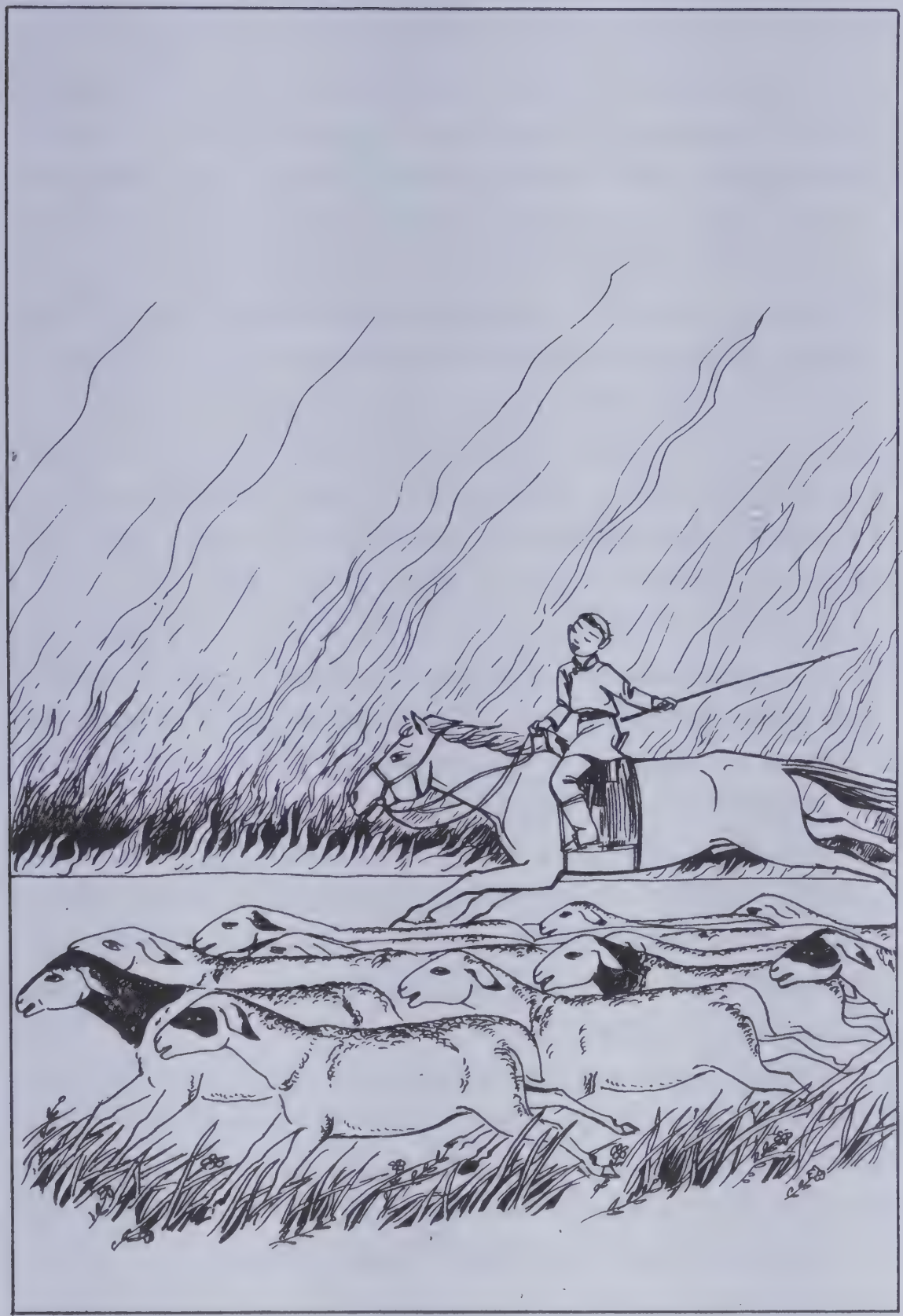
for matters took their own course. Although I held the sheep from scattering, the fire had already begun to singe their fleece. Everywhere old dry grass was burning and my sheep looked as if they were on fire.

My horse galloped madly and I shouted until my lungs nearly burst, trying to drive the sheep against the fire. Despite my frantic efforts, I managed to take only about a hundred of them across the main fire line. The fire passed quickly, and I was left on the ashes with about a hundred sheep a hundred fire-scorched sheep flocked together. Most of the sheep had run away with the fire, engulfed in flames and smoke. Leaving my hundred scorched sheep, I rode after the fire. Many sheep had been burnt black and lay helpless on the path. Usually the leg tendons of a sheep burn and shrink before anything else, causing the running animal to fall like a chopped tree. The numbers of such fallen sheep increased as my horse and I moved onward.

Suddenly, an idea struck me. If the few leading sheep were still unburnt, I could drive them into a salt marsh full of bundargana. Though a little late in coming, this wasn't such a bad idea, for the red bundargana in the salt marsh would not burn easily. In there, they would be safe.

I crossed the fire on my horse and, true enough, the sheep in the lead were fleeing unscorched. I separated over a hundred sheep from the flock and urged them on faster.

Then I saw that the level land ended in a deep valley filled with bundargana. Tall, thick straw grew in the hollow, and straw, I knew, burns easily. I had to drive my sheep through that straw before they caught fire,



but as the straws were tall and dense, my sheep could not penetrate them. They came to a standstill. I struggled to get them out through the straw, and I and my horse managed to reach the edge of the dry circular salt marsh in time. Now there was no doubt whatsoever that very soon only the sheep's carcasses would be left. The tall, thick straw started burning with flames as high as two meters, and in the midst of that I knew that our sheep were burning. Thus, our sheep were annihilated.

My dear minikin-eared ewe was also probably burnt to death, but, I thought, she just may still be alive. I started calling with all my might, "My minikin! My minikin! My minikin ewe, come out here!"

Then, a sheep came running out of the burning straw. It was my minikin-eared ewe. My ewe with the tiny ears! She wasn't at all harmed by the fire and had come at my calling. I was so relieved.

I hastily dismounted from my horse and kissed the ewe. She began rubbing my hands with her pretty soft muzzle, asking for a candy, as if everything around was calm and peaceful. Hearing my voice she had perhaps thought that I was going to give her some candies. This thought had saved her life.

Following the minikin-eared ewe, ten sheep came out of the burning straw. As anyone knows, sheep always follow where the others go. The ten sheep that were closest to the ewe had come out of the straws, but the rest were burnt to death. I saw with my own eyes many sheep burning alive in the straws. The fire burnt the straws in the hollow land, but died down when it reached the dry circular salt marsh bundargana. I was safe from danger, and so was my minikin-eared ewe.

Only charred carcasses were left of several hundred sheep which I had herded for so long. As I drove the remaining ten sheep with my minikin-eared ewe back toward home, I saw burning dry dung, rising smoke and half-burnt sheep struggling and dying.

Darkness had already fallen when I arrived home. Although my parents were very glad to see me alive and safe, I felt so depressed as I recalled my mother's words, "Keep watch over the sheep!"

The hundred sheep which I had taken through the fire were flocked together near the ger. I let the ten sheep and the ewe join them. They were all that remained of the hundreds of sheep that we had owned.

The next day I searched for our horses, and found them in the bundargana-filled ravine. They had run into the ravine and so were safe and sound, out of danger of the fire.

Our neighbour Tavkhai's sheep were not at all harmed by the fire, for he had locked them in a pen. I regretted bitterly not having been able to either erect a pen around my sheep or do drive them into the ravine with bundargana. This time, however, I had erred by following the older people's instructions to drive the sheep against the fire. I reminded myself to enter a ravine with bundargana if anything like this should happen again. My parents should not have left me alone with so many sheep as they left to fight the fire. When one thinks over mistakes afterwards, their causes become more clear.

The day after the fire was put out, our family moved to a new place. We chose ten to twenty fat sheep from among the dead ones, and we invited the local people

to choose any of the remaining sheep. Because it was a warm autumn day, the carcasses were liable to rot quickly.

As we migrated, the country where just a few days before fine dry grass had been swaying now looked like a barren wasteland. It had a ghastly, dead look. The fine dry grass of the pasture land had become loose gray ash strewn everywhere one looked.

A great deal of livestock and property belonging to many families was lost or ruined in this fire. If there hadn't been that ravine with bundargana nearby, the fire would have progressed farther, bringing much more damage and sorrow. Disasters of this kind sometimes break out in the steppes, leaving behind complete desolation.

Later I heard the following report: The fire started near the Gerel family, people said. Gerel's two sons used to smoke while they tended their sheep. They never had matches, so they always had dry dung burning. This time their burning dung had been scattered in strong wind, and fire had broken out in the grass. The two boys became confused, and in fear ran away instead of attempting to put out the fire. The fire then raged wildly, destroying the entire neighbouring pastures until it reached the ravine with bundargana, where it finally died out.

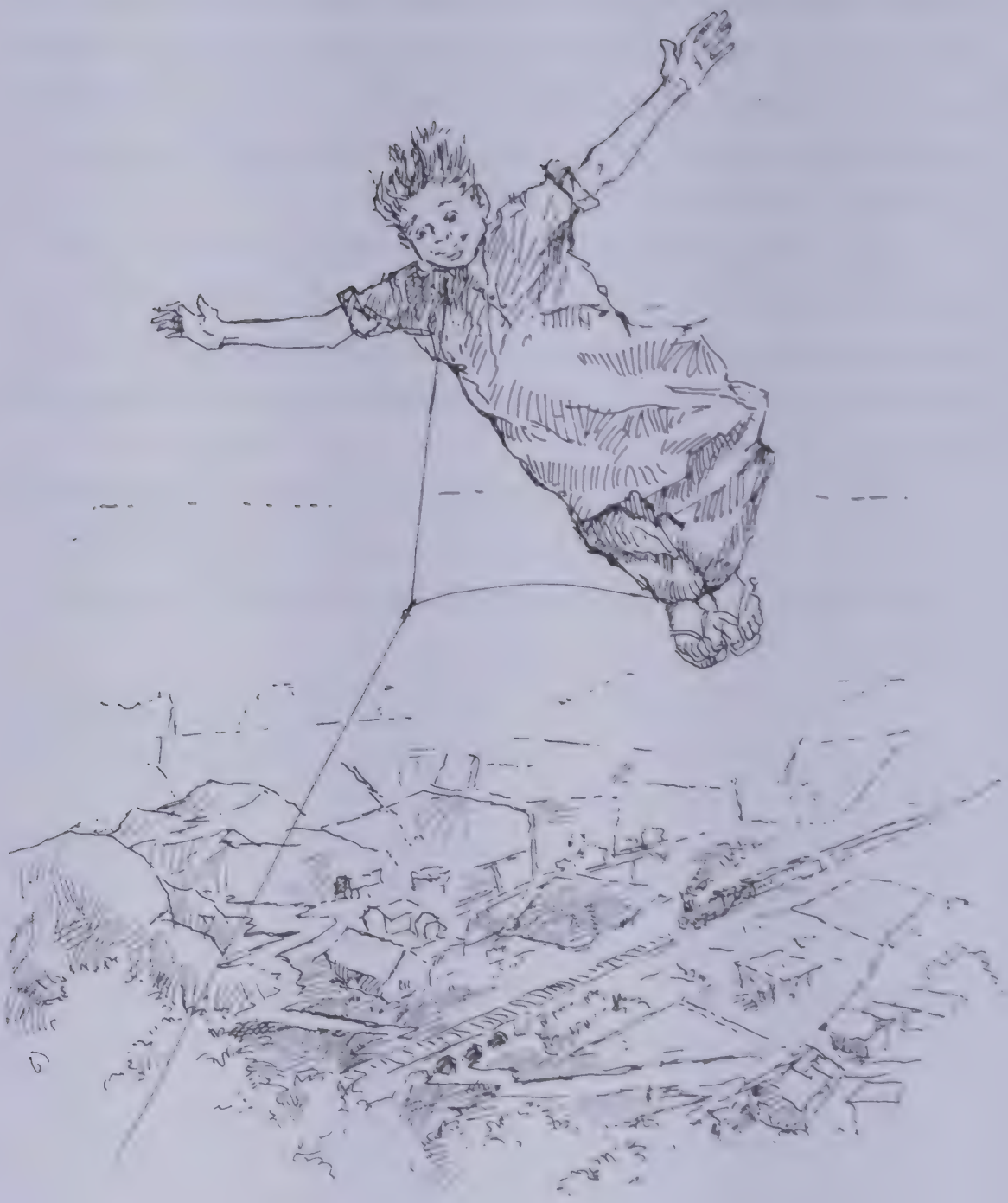
Once again I tended the few sheep which were left alive. The poor sheep, burnt and scorched, were feeding about me. Among them my dear minikin-eared ewe was the whitest of all, and was still on such friendly terms with me. At first, the sheep appeared to me only a little singed, apparently without having come to

much harm, but as winter approached, the hooves of the injured sheep fell off and many died. In spring several ewes had lambed, but they could not feed their lambs, for their nipples had been burnt in the fire, so our flock of sheep born in spring was decreased even further. Happily, my minikin-eared ewe had given birth to two fine lambs, also with tiny ears, and they were growing quite well.

Years passed, and I became a man of the city. One summer I returned to my family's ger in the country. Seeing many sheep with minikin ears among our flock of sheep, I recalled my dear minikin-eared ewe and the disastrous fire.

"These sheep with tiny ears are probably off-spring of my ewe with minikin ears," I thought. Since that time, I have had a special liking to any ewe with minikin ears.

Translated by D. Altangerel
Illustrated by D. Boldbaatar



A Kite in the Sky

Syed Fateh Ali Anvery

Pakistan

Secretly I always laughed at her ancient admonitions. Many of them sounded preposterous enough to irk me, and if I did not laugh at them openly it was only because of my respect for her. She was tiresomely fond of me because I was her only grandchild, and an orphan.

She was most insistent that I should never climb up onto the roof to fly kites at noon. That was the time for sorceresses, she said, to catch stray children and eat up their entrails. The sorceresses were apparently very hungry at that time of the day, and uncooked and unseasoned livers of children were their favourite dish. I wanted to ask questions, but witchcraft was a hush-hush subject. The shady creatures could be lurking about, and to mention them would be to tempt them.

Flying kites was my favourite hobby. It gave me an immense feeling of freedom. When a kite obeyed the slightest tug on the string by my index-finger, my heart was filled with the greatest joy. It turned loops or made wide circles, rose up majestically or made a nose-dive as I wished. Up in the air it was as faithful to me as my

dog on the ground, and even Tiger loved to watch me flying kites.

Nobody believed in witches or in their dark devices, and even if I wanted to please Grandmother, I could not possibly change my time to fly kites. Noontime was my only gap, and luckily it was the time Grandmother had her cat-nap. There were so many things to keep me busy later on in the day.

The birds' nests for instance. I knew the number and colour of every bird's egg laid in every nest cleverly hidden away in the top foliage of tall trees. The nests were most jealously guarded by parent birds, and the only time for me to inspect them was about 1 p.m., just after people had eaten their mid-day meals and housewives had thrown away crumbs of bread and lumps of stale rice for birds to feed on. While the parent birds were away to feed themselves, I had taken it upon myself to keep a watch on the nest against marauding crows and blackbirds.

Immediately after my nest-watching it was time for a swim in the pond. By that time the herdsmen had driven away the wallowing buffaloes for the second milching of the day. Soon the water became clear again and there was no fear of suspended particles of sand to make burning scratches on our backs and bellies.

Towards evening, the wind stirred up nice and cool and it was time for hockey or football. We played until dusk, after which we were not allowed to stay out of doors.

There was really no other time for flying kites, and fly them I must. To me kites were little creatures. They would suffocate in the cabinet if they were not taken

out and flown to their hearts, content. I had two great kites and I flew each of them on alternate days.

It was one of those days when summer was at its peak. The wind hardly stirred and the sun beat mercilessly down, which meant that the monsoons were not far away. Riding back from school, which was three miles down the road, we stopped at several places to pick shirt-front-fulls of jambolinas. At the level-crossing we found the gates drawn shut as a signal that the up train was about to come thundering by. We took out paisa coins from our pockets and placed them on one of the rails, then ran back to where our bicycles were parked among the mango trees. Soon the train came and rolled past heavily. We found the paisa coins pressed flat and enlarged. Now we were set to dupe the half-blind vendor of chick-peas on the other side of the crossing, but he was not there, and so we rode home sweating.

At home, Grandmother sat waiting with the meal arranged nicely on a piece of white cloth on the mat. The smell from a distance told me it was again the sliced bitter gourd cooked in lentils which I detested, but the sight of wheat dumplings in curd brought back my appetite and I fell to it immediately after washing my hands.

"Why must you cook these bitter gourds in lentils so often?" I demanded, as if I were the master of the house.

"Because it is good to eat in summer. It purifies the blood. Otherwise you will have painfully blood-shot eyes and prickly heat all over your skin. Now don't you make faces. Eat it."

I took a mouthful and was about to spit it out, but then gulped it down with a drink of water.

"And don't you rush to the roof with your kites when I fall asleep," she warned me.

"Tell me about those things, Grandmother," I asked to ease her concern. "What do they look like?"

"They wear long cloaks for one thing. For another, they have their toes stuck to their heals backwards."

"And what do they do with the dead bodies of the children after they have eaten up their livers?"

"They throw them down in the pond."

I stifled an urge to burst into laughter. Who knew the pond better than I did? I knew every inch of it. I knew where the singhara creepers were the thickest and I knew its depth at various points.

Grandmother was now visibly drowsy. She reclined herself against a long pillow on the mat, and soon she was dribbling from a corner of her mouth. In a moment she was breathing rhythmically. That was my signal to fetch my kite and reel of string and dash upstairs. I chose the red kite with big round blue eyes. It was her turn to fly and she was impatient.

The breeze was sucked up, it seemed, during that part of the day, and not a leaf stirred. It was difficult getting the kite up. It required a special technique, a few sharp tugs and a little let-go. After a few more short tugs and a sharp pull, the kite jogged and danced with glee and quickly found an uplifting current of warm wind. In no time at all it was making heavy demands on the string which I paid out liberally. It made a wide sweep as if of its own free will, stalked a little, and then made an almost right-angle ascent in the other direction. I had paid out the last few yards of the string on my reel and up there, far away in the sky, the kite stood still as if enjoying her view of the little world below. Tiger joined me soon on the roof. Grandmother would have approved of it, perhaps; with Tiger on my side, the vilest of hungry witches could not come near me.

When a kite was up at its highest, it always filled me with envy. I wanted to be a kite myself. I had a keen desire to see the world — my world — from up above. Sometimes I secretly wished I could change places with

the kite. Up there, the red kite's skin was vibrating with joy. The string between my thumb and forefinger conveyed this feeling of joy to me, and I began to envy the kite even more. I wished the string could convey my feelings of envy to the kite. The string was the only means of communication between us, and through it we talked like friends. When it was tired of dangling to and fro, I twirled my forefinger and the kite swooped down in a hearty dive. The kite told me when she was afraid of striking a tree-top, so I pulled the string and up she went a magnificent climb.

"Come on, kite!" I shouted through the string. "Let us change positions for a little while. Come down and take my place, and let me take your place up there. Can you hear me?"

The kite heard me, it seemed, for the transfor-mation took place instantly. Suddenly I was up. A cool breeze sent shudders down my spine and the sight of things below gave me a singular ecstatic pleasure. The scenery was so evenly flat, like some geometrical drawing on a sheet of paper — the farm-lands looking like squares, rectangles and rhombuses. My own house-top looked like a tiny dot, and I could not spot Tiger. Oh, and the groves of trees and the penciled road to my school and the silver pond. It was a magnificent sight! The railway line looked like a long, curling centipede.

The kite-boy who stood on the roof-top in my place appeared to know the kite-flying technique better than I did. He manipulated the string most adroitly. He turned his wrist and flexed his forefinger so gently and cleverly that I never even felt the tug. I went into loops gently, swept across the horizon majestically, and noted

for the first time the sweep of the landscape, the slope towards the viaduct making room for the river to flow as it did. I glided over the outcrop of hills and floated over tree-tops. Only once did I go into a frightening nose-dive when my liver jumped into my mouth, but the kite-boy below gave the string a most gentle tug and I again began to rise up gloriously.

It was in the act of rising when the unfortunate thing happened. I was suddenly lifeless and began dangling down as a leaf blown away by the wind. I knew the reason. I had forgotten to tie the end of the string around the reel, and the kite boy did not know. He was paying

out the string fast when the end slipped out of his grasp and our communication broke down. I crashed miserably onto the top branches of an acacia tree. My skin was mercilessly torn, and the force of the impact broke my spine. I hung there limply. I had a queer feeling that sharp teeth were gnawing at my entrails. Something pulled out my liver, and I passed out.

I don't know when I came to, but when I did I had the taste of soap in my mouth and one of my legs, all plastered up, rested on a trestle. A nice-looking nurse smiled and whispered into my ear, "Don't worry. You are all right. It is only a fractured shin-bone. I'll bring you a drink," she said.

Her starched headgear was so assuring. I was glad that I was not looking into the face of a sorceress. I pulled at her apron and asked what had happened to me.

"You had a heat-stroke and fell down from the roof," she told me. "You have bruised yourself badly, you know. Don't worry. You'll be all right soon, but remember — no more kite-flying on the roof-top. Promise?"

Illustrated by Ather Jamal

Impong Sela

Epifanio G. Matute

Philippines

Now Impong Sela was regarding with intense concern her sixteen-year-old grandson who lay almost inert. Under the white sheets the boy was straight as a corpse, unmoving but for the occasional slight twitching of dehydrated lips, pale as tallows. She felt with her palm the patient's forehead. The boy stirred as if in response, but nevertheless remained undisturbed from his deep sleep.

"Maria Santisima!" Impong Sela quakingly to herself, lifting her hand from her grandson's forehead. "His fever has returned."

The old woman felt a sudden surge of grief wrench her breast. The boy's fever had vanished two days ago, thanks to his saintly namesake, but now... Holy Mother of Perpetual Help! This disturbed her greatly. She knew that when a fever returned, it was extremely dangerous. What if her grandson, her most precious Pepe... Merciful Heaven!

Why, was it not she who had brought this boy up? Her very first grandson from her only son, Pepe received the shower of Impong Sela's love, all the care

and rearing a grandmother could give. The boy's parents knew almost nothing of his growing up. "Grandma's pet," he was called. True to form, Pepe was pampered. He was abandoned to pampering.

Thus he became the reason for the constant dispute between Conrado and Impong Sela. There were heated debates between son and mother, but always the old woman prevailed. She never let the father touch Pepe.

And now...

Impong Sela began searching her mind. Pepe must be saved from the claws of death. In her confusion, memories came to her of saints, solemn vows, devotions... Ah... !

"The Holy Nazarene!" She whispered, lifting her eyes like one in a trance. "Help, Merciful Lord! Save my grandson, and we will attend mass in Quiapo for nine Fridays. Please don't take him yet."

She recalled that the same vow had saved her son, Pepe's father, when he was but seven years old. Would that save her grandson now, she prayed.

After a time the patient stirred. Slowly he opened his eyes, as if in a dream, and looked about him. Before long he made out his grandmother at his side. From under the sheets he reached out and took the old woman's hand.

"Grandma," he called faintly.

"What is it, son?" Impong Sela answered, turning and bending somewhat, listening closely to the boy's words.

"I'm hungry."

"I'll get you some milk."

"No, I'm tired of milk."

The old woman hesitated. Milk, meat soup, orange juice, tea and no more. The doctor had said to give him nothing else.

"Soup, child, would you like soup?"

"I don't want soup!"

"Orange juice, then?" This morning the boy had pushed away and spilled the glassful she had offered him. And Pepe detested tea, even when he was well.

"I'm hungry, Grandma!" Pepe persisted, with a trace of annoyance.

"Just a moment, then, son," the old woman rose and left the room.

Shortly, Impong Sela returned with a dish of rice steeped in soup of stewed beef, and a spoon. "Here, child, don't eat too much, yes?"

Eyeing the food, Pepe tried to rise, but fell back weakly on his pillows. The old woman hurried to the side of her enfeebled grandson. "Don't force yourself, son." She said, propping up the pillows against the wall. "Here, lean yourself against these."

With her help, Pepe sat up. Impong Sela fed him. A spoonful. Two spoonfuls. Three. Four. Greedily, the famished boy lunged at each.

"Mother! What are you doing... " Conrado came running into the room, wanting to grab the dishful of food from Impong Sela, but it was too late. The plate was almost clean.

"Mother! Are you crazy!" Conrado blurted out. Didn't you hear what the doctor said?"

"Aw, leave me be!" The old woman cut in. "I know what I'm doing. How will the child regain his strength if you starve him? He won't die from a dishful of rice.

Let him die with his eyes shut, not staring. Totooooy! Neneeee!"

Pepe's little brother and sister ran into the room.

"Don't run! Don't you see your brother's sick? Here, eat this," Impong Sela thrust at them Pepe's leftovers. "God's grace should not be wasted."

"Don't!" Conrado almost shouted. "Mother, don't you know Pepe has typhoid?"

"So what? The children will be contaminated?" The old woman asked with a challenge. "The trouble is, you believe everything the Americans brought here. So they will eat the *korobyo* from Pepe's illness? Tse! In our time, no one boiled his drinking water, there were no artesian wells. We all drank from the spring with all the scum in it. Look at me now. How old am I? Where's this korobyo you're talking about? Why didn't I die? And you, the new generation, who are so finicky about everything, how many of you will reach our age? What you're saying is pure nonsense. If the Lord God wants you to go, you'll go, get yourself one thousand doctors. Believe in Him, not in all this madness. Eat this," she turned to the other children, "and don't stand there like tree stumps."

With visible doubt, Totoy and Nene sought aid with glances to their father, who was himself left all but helpless after the lengthy lecture.

"Why, are you afraid?" Impong Sela asked her grandchildren, while casting a sidelong glance at her son. With this, she took her slipper off one foot and waved it threateningly. "Let's see who's obeyed in this house! You eat it or else... "

Quaking with fear, the children obeyed. The father

looked away, out of the window.

In the morning, Pepe was delirious. The fever had returned with a vengeance, punishing him more severely. He looked like he was being roasted in flames, turning distractedly in his bed, giving out heartbreaking moans. In the eyes of Sinang, his mother, could be detected the tortuous grief only a mother can feel at these moments, as she beheld the piteous condition of her son. There, too, was Impong Sela. But she said nothing, sat motionless.

"I'm sure the boy ate something he shouldn't have. It seems you didn't heed my advice," the doctor said, despite the parents' denials on Impong Sela's behalf. "He's in a bad state."

The doctor was not mistaken. Within the next hour, Pepe was again tossing and rolling uncontrollably in his bed, throwing his head this way and that, and crying out incoherently as those who watched bit their lips. Sinang's tears rolled in a chain down her face, without pause, without letup. Conrado grit his teeth, while Impong Sela murmured ceaseless prayers.

"Sinang," the man called out softly to his wife, "don't cry. We'd better take him to the hospital."

"Hospital!" Impong Sela butted in, leaving her prayers. "And let him die there? I won't permit it! Don't you ever take my Pepe to the hospital. If you're fed up with looking after him, leave my grandchild to me. I can take care of him myself. You're a fine father, you! When you were this big and you felt ill, I suffered looking after you by myself. I never let you out of my sight. If you can't do this for your son now — then let me do it."

"But, Mother!" Conrado was pleading. "What can we do here?" We lack things, implements. At the hospital... "

"At the hospital," when Impong Sela started mocking, she was ready to fight, "especially if you're in the free ward, they'll only look at you when they want to. What is it to them if you're sick — they don't know you from Adam. You'll die if you'll die, and what is it to them? Look what happened to Kumareng Paula, she stayed the first day at the hospital and... Ave Maria Purisima! Don't you move my grandson an inch! Don't you ever!"

Blood rushed up Conrado's face. He wanted to scream, he wanted to revolt, he wanted to be crushed between sky and earth.

But from his trembling lips nothing came out but a choked "My God ! My God!" In the middle of his weeping, the kindly Sinang went up to him and pled with a "let-Mother-have-her-way" look. With a deep sigh, Conrado fell limp into a chair. The debate was closed.

Early the next morning, they were surprised to find Impong Sela weeping, crying her heart out all alone in a corner. She had been steadfastly dry-eyed when Pepe was suffering, but now that Pepe lay peacefully, thanks to the injection the doctor administered...

"Why, Mother?" Conrado asked in wonder.

"I was thinking," the old woman sobbed, "Juan's teen-age daughter died just the other week!"

"Oh, so what?" The son asked with increasing amazement, unable to connect Mang Juan's daughter's death with his mother's grief.

"And when a young lass dies in one place, in that same place a young man will follow."

"Madness! You're much too superstitious. There's no sense in all this... " conrado almost laughed at his mother.

"But it's true! Don't make fun of this old belief. I've seen many instances to prove it. It never fails."

"What you saw were mere coincidences. Don't worry yourself with this nonsense."

"And one more thing," the old woman persisted. "Last night the fowls were quacking. When your late father passed away, the same thing happened just the night before. Oh, my poor Pepeeee!"

And...

Mystery or no mystery, Impong Sela's tears continued flowing until the green growth of weeds were a finger's length on her beloved grandson's earthen grave.

Translated by Marne L. Kilates
Illustrated by Albert E. Gamos

Kiem — A Manly Boy

Ma Van Khang

Vietnam

It was nightfall. Tu slowly pedaled home. This summer his three children were staying with his mother in the countryside, so Tu was enjoying leisure. Pushing his bicycle upstairs, Tu opened the door, then left the bicycle in the kitchen and went into the back room as his wife had a visitor in the other room.

Their apartment had two rooms, so he or his wife could talk freely with their friends without distracting the other. Tu normally popped in to say hello to his wife's guest and then withdrew to his room, but this time, when he noticed that his wife's guest was only a boy 13 or 14 years old, he stopped just outside and listened to their conversation over dinner.

"Take more, my dear!" She told her young guest. "Finish it, and I'll get you more."

"Thank you, Auntie! Sure, I will!" The boy said honestly. "I'm a strong eater. I used to eat seven bowls at a meal before."

"You must be kidding! When is that 'before'?"

"When my mother still lived with us. She's so tender-hearted. Not that 'Mother sings, Son claps', as

one says, but even our neighbours said that my mother was good-natured and fair. She never refused to help anyone in difficulty, and was very sensitive to others' suffering."

Tu looked again into the next room, wondering why such a little boy should speak like a grown up. His wife gave the boy another bowlful of rice. He respectfully took it from her with both hands and said softly, "I thank you." It sounded so lovely.

"Take some fried egg, dear."

"No, thank you, I don't like eggs. I'll take some eggplant. My mother was an expert at pickled eggplant. She even put in some garlic and ginger. But she didn't allow me to eat it freely. She said that too much eggplant was not good for my health. But now, I can't even get eggplant."

She clicked her tongue sympathetically, "Things are getting worse nowadays. One dong sometimes can buy only one or two eggplant. You should understand that your father and your stepmother have a big family to look after."

The boy craned his thin neck, swallowing a mouthful of rice, his eyes wide-open. "Of course, I understand that, and more. Take my father for example; he is not in fact a wicked man, but he acts as an opportunist and a coward."

"Why should you speak like that, child?"

As if to retract a slip of the tongue, the boy looked down and quickly changed the subject. "I've done a lot of thinking recently, Auntie, and I feel that fairness should depend on rationality. My stepmother often gives my half-brother and half-sister meat and eggs,

while I get only vegetables. I think it's all right though, because my brother is only three years old and my sister six years old. They are still small; why should someone as big as I am eat into their portions?"

A distasteful smile seemed to flicker across his face as he went on. "But somehow things have gotten out of hand, Auntie. Yesterday, my father came home from work, bringing a tin of milk labelled "Eagle." He mixed me a glass. It's five or six years since I last tasted it. But I hardly had it in my hand before my step-mother snatched the glass from me and pour the milk out in the yard."

"My Goodness!"

"I'm not lying, really. The witch becomes more wicked these days. She told me that if I didn't get enough vegetables for our rabbits, my meals would be cut off, and I would not be allowed to sleep in the house but must "rough it" on the pavement. One day, I was so hungry that my father gave me a bowlful of leftover rice. Somehow she knew it. She ran out, snatching the bowl from my father's hand and emptied it on the ground, saying that it's better to feed the dog than to feed me. I got the message, I should not eat anything without her permission. You know, Auntie, when her children were still babies, I had to hold them. Then she never cut off my meals, but snarled all the time, "If you let him fall down, I'll kill you," the memory of which frightens me even now. But never have I let them fall. I love my brother and sister so much and they were always ill. I had to repeat sixth grade because of them. That's why, as big as I am I'm still in the seventh grade. I don't feel like going to school anymore."

The boy stopped, a mischievous smile on his lips, and then whispered confidentially, "Auntie, I am not wicked, though. Cross my heart! On the tram, if I have money I give some to the blind street singer and his son. One day, I gave some rice to a begger and her daughter, and my stepmother punished me, pushing my head against the wall several times until it was bruised. The other day, I met an old woman carrying a heavy load of rice to the station, and I carried it for her. At the station, she tried to give me ten dong, but I refused. We should care for others, shouldn't we, Auntie?"

Tu was deeply touched by the boy's words. He came out into the room. Now he could clearly see the boy who himself claimed to be a big boy. In fact, he was a skinny little boy, bearing testimony to his forced malnutrition. The hard look on his lean and sunburnt face was overshadowed by the cleverness and innocence reflected in his bright big eyes, roundish ears and black hair. Of his personality, one could sense a harmony of two opposite forces — mischief resulting from his hard life mixed with twinkling affection and a surprising joyfulness.

Tu rinsed the raincoat and placed it on the hook behind the door, saying "Why don't you place the dishes on the table dear? It's more comfortable."

The boy murmured his salutation to Tu, and put the already empty bowl down on the tray. He then stood up and said politely, "Thank you Auntie and Uncle. I am full now."

"Oh! Don't play guest with us, okay?" Tu said joyfully.

The boy refused a cup of tea offered by Mme Tu with a smile, saying good-bye to them as he went out of the door.

Tu brought the tea tray and placed it on the table. His wife wiped a tear with a handkerchief. "I placed the dishes on the table but he preferred to have them on the floor."

"Where did you meet him?"

"I went downstrairs to fetch water. I was carrying it upstairs when he came and offered his help. I invited him in. He came in and played with the kids' toys, dolls, car, tanks and others. Talking with him I learned that

he lives in the building behind ours. He is the son of Mr. Thong who works in the commercial branch and Mrs. Sam, the meat shop assistant. Mr. Thong married her after he divorced his first wife. This boy is his son with his first wife. I don't understand why some folks make their own children's lives unhappy."

Since that day, little Kiem became their frequent guest. He had nobody else to open his heart to, and Mme Tu knew how to talk to and assure children. With all her children on holiday in the countryside, she had much more free time. She herself came from the countryside, and it was expressed on her face and in her honesty and candor.

Kiem often came in the afternoon, and occasionally he stayed for dinner. Sometimes he brought them a bunch of fresh water spinach that he grew himself. Many times he simply sat there, sad and exhausted, with bruises on his face which told of his punishment. He often played with the Tu's children's toys, or helped crack groundnuts or clean the house while telling her many stories.

It turned out that he was forced to taste the bitterness of life very early. He told of a girl nextdoor who committed suicide because she was forced by her stepmother to marry a man she didn't love, and that the police had recently arrested a colleague of his stepmother. He could list many pickpockets and robbers, as well as recount the intrigues and tricks of speculators and illegal traders. He knew of many social vices that were practiced, such as bribes to gain a trip abroad or to be accepted into a trade union. He said that the coffee in Shop A was not really coffee, but was

only a mixture of Senna and glutinous rice powder. He recited folk-songs, popular satirical verses and told anecdotes. He enjoyed reading very much, and borrowed any story books he could find on Tu's shelves.

The boy was unabashedly expressive, but the Tus were not shocked by his wisdom and experiences. He was neither shameless nor heartless, and though mentally and physically maltreated, he kept himself away from evil. His heart was full of love and affection. He loved his half brother and sister so much, even though so many times he was punished by the stepmother simply because of them. His stepmother loved her own children, and influenced by their mother, the two children became critical of him, resulting in ferocious beatings inflicted by her on their half-brother.

When returning a book to Tu one day, he recounted some scapegoat beatings, and then smiled, "But I can't hate them, Uncle. I cannot stay away even for one day without missing them. I had to take care of them both since they were newly born babies. I did all the washing, bathing, making baby food and feeding them. At that time, my stepmother was still very poor. A road woman, she was. Coming to live with us, she brought along only a worn-out knapsack. Then my father got her a job at the butcher's shop and her life grew better, but, paradoxically, it made her more money-tight and more wicked. Not like me, I feel itchy when I have some money in my pocket, and I buy snacks for the children. Once, I bought them chewing-gum, but my stepmother forced them to spit it out. That brought me a slap on the face, but I didn't care. Seeing little children, I just

want to hold them and buy snacks for them. Uncle, in stories that I read, the good outnumber the wicked, and it should... that way... "

Gradually, they became very fond of the young boy. Tu talked more often with him, feeling from the bottom of his heart that he wanted to be his spiritual guide. Otherwise, a poor boy in such an unlucky plight could easily become affectionless, indifferent and heartless towards other people. Tu and his wife tried to help him as much as they could. They gave him a woollen sweater, a pair of trousers, a hat, a pen and offered to share their meals with him when he was not fed at home. The boy, however, rarely accepted making an issue of self-esteem.

For about a fortnight, the boy did not show up at Tu's home. Tu felt uneasy. His wife said that Kiem, was forced by his stepmother to leave school and seek employment. Tu was more worried. How on earth should the child leave school, saying good-bye to his boyhood to enter the world of work so early?

That Sunday, Tu was cleaning his bicycle when he came. As skinny as ever, he looked two or three inches taller, maybe due to his too-large army uniform, and he looked somehow mischievous and perverse with his close-cropped hair. Tu was so delighted that he stopped cleaning the bicycle and took him inside.

"We haven't seen you for ages. Where have you been recently? Sit down and have some tea, my boy."

Kiem did as bid and laughing heartily, said, "I am getting married soon, folks!"

Tu's wife, cleaning rice, was startled, and put down the sieve to give full attention to Kiem.

Tu stuttered, "Is that true? Are you really going to get married?"

He laughed, "I'm kidding. That thought just flickered across my mind as I came here. Anyhow when I do get married, my wife and I will love each other 'until death do us part' as you do."

Tu felt stinging pain in his heart. Never had he heard from a child such thoughts and intentions, so fine and yet so dreadful, for surely he had learned them from his own bitter experience.

Tu's wife resumed sieving the rice with a smile. "You, silly thing! What do you know about us then?"

"Plenty, and simply by watching you."

"You practice mind-reading?" She teased him.

Kiem smiled mischievously, "I do." Then he turned to Tu. "I would like to ask you this — is it true that the poor often love each other while the rich are always money-tight and heartless?"

"Not necessarily so! Let me put it this way — stinginess makes richness and when one becomes rich, he wants to be richer, which makes him tighter with his money. It is a vicious circle, I guess."

"Let me ask you — when people do something evil, do they know it?"

"Normal people do. But... "

The child cut in, "Of course they all know, Uncle. Do you know why smugglers, thieves and pick-pockets often seem to be worshippers? They fear the punishment of God, that is why! My stepmother goes to the temple very often, she has even been to the Blue Temple, far north in Tuyen Quang province. Hum, humans seem to be a weird species, Uncle! They

earnestly struggle to survive, at the same time eager to kill each other."

Tu turned suddenly to look at the child and shuddered. Where did he get and take to heart these frightful ideas?

The boy turned to face Tu as if he felt his anxious look. "I know I'm talking nonsense. Last week, when my stepmother was away, I slipped back to see my mother."

"Where is she living now?"

"Very far away, at Giap Bat station," said Kiem, unbuttoning his left breast-pocket. "I have thirty dong that my mother just gave me. Please keep it for me, otherwise I'll spend it all. She also gave me a cake, and urged me to eat it right away. Perhaps she was afraid that I would take it home to my half-brother and sister."

"Your mother would naturally love you more than she loves the others," Tu's wife explained.

"But I also love my brother and sister."

Tu's wife stood up, poured the rice into a bucket, and asked casually, "Your mother loves you so much; why don't you go and live with her, then?"

"How can I, Auntie?" He seemed disturbed, and stared at her. "She gave me the money and the cakes when her husband was not around. He is rich, but very nasty. He's a tanker driver! 'First, tanker driver; second, bus driver; third, lorry driver; and last, car driver,' as one says in terms of earnings. I had to keep my eyes wide open when I visited my mother. The couple — that is he and my mother — agreed that they would have nothing to do with the children of their first marriages. How cruel! I went because I missed my

mother, not to beg for anything. Yet, whenever I came, he looked sullenly upon me."

"I was very lucky this time. I met sister Hoa, his daughter. She is nineteen years old and a college student of chemistry. She lives all alone, and makes her living by knitting sweaters for others. 'My brother', she told me, 'you and I are in the same boat, and that's why I care for you. I am going to graduate, and when I get a job, I'll help you with my modest salary!'"

He paused, overcome with emotion, then turned toward the door and spoke queitly. "I should not blame them, though I know it is a marriage of convenience, Auntie. When my father fell for that witch, my mother was so heartbroken that she left home and met this driver. What a story! Few people ever dare to overlook money, Auntie," he said, and stood to leave.

Tu was shocked. He went out to see the boy off. He wondered what would lie ahead for the boy, and about his candid observation of human beings, his hatred of selfishness, the money he entrusted to the care of his wife...

About to bid goodbye, Kiem noticed Tu's bicycle. He bent down, spun its pedal and looked up. "The cog wheel is worn out. If you want, I'll show you where to buy a new one, a genuine one, unlike those counterfeit items sold in the street. These vendors are all robbers in disguise, but they'll drop dead seeing me in this uniform my mother bought me." He smiled, hitched up his too-large trousers and left.

Dress makes a man conscious of his behaviour and dignity. In that large army uniform, an earthy mode supposed to bring out an experienced and mature

personality, the world Kiem joined. What kind of man would he become?

Tu was uneasy about the boy's plight and his precarious future. One afternoon, he came back from his office, and before he had ever had time to bring the bicycle in, his wife shouted out, "Kiem has run off!"

Tu hurriedly leaned the bicycle against the wall and asked breathlessly, "When has he gone?"

"He came here at noon today and asked for the thirty dong I kept for him. When I insisted on knowing his destination, he only said he'll go to the *Apatite* mine in Lao Cai."

Tu fell limply into a chair. "Why did he leave so abruptly?"

"His stepmother was just too cruel. I can hardly believe what their neighbours told me." Tears rolled from her eyes as she went on. "The day before yesterday, he broke a cup's handle, and she threw it into his face, nearly blinding him. Then, when she heard the neighbours' criticism, she compelled her husband to tie the boy to a bed's leg and give him a vicious beating. My God! How on earth could she be so cruel to such an obedient and well-behaved child?"

Tu tried to keep calm. "How do you know he'll run off?"

"He told me so. He said he had intended to leave long ago, but did not have the heart to leave his brother and sister. His stepmother is often sick these days, so the two children will suffer with nobody to look after them."

Tu struggled to control his feelings. "Why didn't you tell him not to do so?"

Tu's wife looked away and said chokingly, "Certainly I did, but he said he had already thought it over. I prepared a meal for him, and gave him another twenty dong. He thanked me, asked me to covey his farewell to you, and walked to the station."

Tu sat in silence, sensing that something so precious had just slipped out of his hand. He felt a pain deep in his heart, and tried to evade the blame for this tragedy. He had no means to help, and had managed to do nothing at all to appease the boy's sufferings and brings his parents to their senses. Tu was not the kind of man who could make light of the paradoxical in life, and he was so preoccupied with thoughts of the boy's pitiable life that for several nights he could not sleep. It was hard for public servants such as he and his wife to simply make ends meet, but they really loved each other. Although their three children had to share the economic plight of the family, they could enjoy parental affection, which naturally brought out the virtuousness in them.

Kiem was gone! But to where? Could he possibly fall into the grips of social vices that are so visible nowadays? It was not easy to get away from them for anyone of weak character, Kiem was really only a naïve boy. What could Tu do for him and for others in similar strife? Was feeling sad, worried, and sympathetic all that he could do? Was he simply charitable at heart, but passive in deeds?

After a while, Tu said slowly, sadly, "I should have told you early but I was afraid... It would be better if we could have adopted him, or even if we could have sent him to the countryside."

His wife did not turn around. Looking through the window, she said, blinking lightly, "I didn't know whether you would agree or not, but I proposed to him the very thing you have just said. However, he replied, "I thank you both for your kindness, but it will not work that way. You would have trouble with that witch if she learns of it. Recently she has shown with abusive languages at all our neighbours, claiming that they have incited me against her, are providing me shelter, etc...."

Beating the arms of the chair with his hands, Tu stood up angrily and raised his voice. "I dare her to do so! It is my duty to love and to protect children. The law does not allow her to abuse her husband's own son. I will not stand by silently any longer, I will write to newspapers about it."

Tu's wife said sadly, "What a cruel woman, she is!"

Tu knew instinctively that he had to take action against the evil. He went to the meat shop to see with his own eyes the nasty woman who he would denounce in his article. He saw a nimble and talkative lady who looked about thirty-five years old. Her hands skillfully cut the meat, weighed it and threaded the slices together while glancing up and down nervously. Shrill words were spitted out from her thin-lipped mouth as if from a machine-gun. They came, surprisingly, from a dried fish-like body instead of a strong one as Tu had anticipated. A gold necklace hung down on her flat-chest, and her prominently extended cheek bones made her look even thinner. Nothing remained of the beauty, if any, that once had charmed Kiem's father except the thinly-lined, too-dark eyebrows framing a jaundiced

complexion. All seemed to indicate gradual exhaustion from a serious visceral disease. Tu was beginning to feel so sorry for this woman, who might have fallen victim to needy circumstances and illness, that he had almost convinced himself to not write that article.

Just then, a barrel-like fat woman elbowed him aside and slipped into the rear of the shop, and minutes later came out with a basketful of pork in her hands. Looking at the flat-chested stepmother, she asked with a grin, "Well, that son of a bitch ran off?" The latter made a face, while poking through a pig head on the table with an awl, "Seems a relief for me, eh!"

"Take anything away?"

"Bet not! Otherwise I'll fix him!"

Tu left, feeling no pity for the woman. Especially, when he went to the local authorities to further enquire about her, he learned that in addition to being so cruel towards her husband's own son, she was also suspected of under-handed dealings as an employee. Tu completed the article as quickly as he could. Two weeks later, it appeared in the city's newspaper under the indignant title, "Stop at once abuse of husband's own son." No names or addresses were included, and the article was signed "The constructive critic."

Two days later, when Tu was sitting at home, he heard a lot of shouting in the courtyard. Looking down, he immediately recognized his character. It was the woman alright, exposing her true nasty personality, and Tu once again marveled at how much and how long the boy had suffered.

She stood akimbo, her feet apart, and her shrill voice let loose a tirade of foul words. "Damn you, whosoever

tried to slander me! Damn you, whosoever incited my little boy against me. You brute! You murderer! God damn you what you have done to me and the boy. I've looked after him since he was still in diapers. If I fed my own child one spoon of food, I had to feed him two. He was so ungrateful, and even ran away with a golden ring of mine and five hundred dong in cash..."

The stream of abuse was spit out with deliberate hatred against Tu. No one knew for sure how long it would go on, until a man who seemed to be her husband appeared. He was a burly man with a bushy beard, and eyes lying deep in their holes on an expressionless face. He hesitantly approached her and said something in a low and unclear voice. She turned back and shouted in the man's face, "They threw dirty paint at me, so I had to wipe it off myself. Don't poke your nose into my affairs, it is none of your business. Huh, this woman had snatched the other's husband and treated his own son badly? I dare the gossiper, whoever you are, to come here and say that to me; otherwise, tuck your head into the toilet and say whatever you will!" The building was suddenly noisy. Crowds of people in all corridors burst out laughing, as if watching a clown. Tu's wife turned away and said angrily, "What a bad-mouthed woman! Is she not scared of sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind?"

Reap as one has sown! Is it true that there exists such a law of Karma in human life? Tu did not himself believe that human destinies might be controlled by a supernatural power. However, what he witnessed a few days later left him stunned for a moment.

On that weekend afternoon, Tu arrived home from

the office to find an ambulance parked behind the building. Loud voices were heard, and, after a while the ambulance left. From the neighbours he learned that Kiem's stepmother had had a sudden heart attack while she was walking up the stairs. The news stupified him, even though he had suspected her disease when he had first seen her. From then on, the subject was never part of their conversation at home.

Time passed by quietly and uneventfully, until one day when Tu answered a knock at the door. It was poor little Kiem, holding hands with the other two children — a little boy and a little girl. Seeing Tu at the door, he bowed and urged the children, "Brother Chi and Sister Oanh! Say hello to Uncle!"

Tu's wife ran out from inside and asked joyfully, "Is it you, Kiem? Where have you been and when did you come back?" Tu extended his warmest welcome. "Please, come inside, my dear."

Kiem looked up, his bright tearful eyes filled with compassion and thoughtfulness. "I came back yesterday. I've come to see both of you, then I'll call on my stepmother in hospital." Tu's wife asked anxiously, "Where are you living now?" The boy looked up again: "My sister Hoa whom I once told you graduated from a chemical college and got a job at the Apatite Plant in Cam Duong, Lao Cai Province. She took me there and managed to send me to a school for miners' children. After school time I do some work to earn money. When I grow up, I will go to a vocational school there, where we still find a lot of kind-hearted people. I hurried back here upon hearing of my stepmother's illness. What a pity!"

"After she was taken to hospital, nobody fed and took care of the children. My father now looks morose and tired out, lacking the will to do anything at all while my stepmother is hospitalized. I feel sorry for her. No one has come to see her at all. She always makes others unhappy, but I believe she herself is unhappy as well. Now no one is sure if she will recover."

Kiem had come back to share and bear part of the sudden tragedy met by his stepmother, although his absence would have been justified as a due retaliation — fair conduct in fairy tales or in the real world. Kiem came back willingly, and was not a bit contended or trimphant in the face of the misfortune which had fallen on his cruel stepmother. Nor was he in the least indifferent. His attitude and his words reflected a love and affection, naïve but generous and courageous, for his relatives. He was a strong bud, a symbol of the human kindness that can grow and be fostered in a natural way in our new life.

After Kiem and his brother and sister had left, Tu sat motionless in the armchair. It was a long time before he could pull himself together, his heart filled with goodness and tenderness. He loved and had a firm belief in that little boy. Life is not meant to be easy; yet it may bring out such exceptional characters as Kiem who truly care for all others. Sitting silently in his chair, Tu was surprised to find in himself an earnest wish that something could be done to help the woman recover from her nearly fatal illness!

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